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COLUMNS IN CONTEXT:  
VENERABLE  
MONUMENTS AND  
LANDSCAPES OF  
MEMORY IN EARLY  
INDIA

TEXT, OBJECT, RECEPTION

The inscribed stone column: a monument to sovereignty ubiquitous in the premodern world.<sup>1</sup> Aśoka inspired the debut of the monolithic column as a text-bearing object in India, an innovation likely inspired by similar practices current in Achaemenid Persia, but columns gained a particular popularity as media for political self-fashioning in the territories of the Gupta rulers (ca. 320–550 CE) and their contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> While appropriating a monumental form introduced by their predecessors, the strategic deployment of these objects within the design of regional political landscapes, combined with the rhetorical language of the inscriptions etched upon them, marks Gupta-period columns as representative of a crucial moment in the historical development of monument practices. Political elites erected towering columns in public ritual spaces to commemorate military victory and territorial expansion, as memo-

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts: A Sourcebook with Bibliography* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2006), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Williams, the preeminent scholar of Gupta period art and architecture draws attention to the increased use of freestanding columns in this period and the stylistic and symbolic innovations that distinguished them from earlier Mauryan examples. Joanna Williams, *Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 95–97.

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rials to honor deceased ancestors, and to celebrate pious works and acts of charity. These events and individuals were eulogized in elaborate works of Sanskrit poetry artfully inscribed upon the object's surface. Intertwining political and religious ideology, the epigraphs also style the columns as pious works by publicizing a ruler's devotion to his or her chosen deity, typically Viṣṇu or Śiva. As deeply rhetorical texts, these dedicatory inscriptions tell us much about how columns were *intended* to be seen by a privileged register of society. This epigraphic interpretation tells us little, however, about how they *could* have been experienced phenomenally and over time by those without access to or concern with their "official" biographies.

Attention to the materiality and social functions of these monuments is largely absent in the historiography of early South Asia, since the inscription has been considered the primary signifier and source of historical data.<sup>3</sup> In addition to neglecting considerations of the material object, exclusively textual approaches also overlook the position of the columns in the physical and built landscapes where they would have been encountered. This persistent displacement of the historical sources diminishes our understanding of both text and object. Through attention to the spatial and material contexts in which the monuments functioned, this project reorients a history of text-centric perspectives to show how the efficacy of the column as a religio-political statement depended on both material and textual semantics. In order to be intelligible instantiations of power and piety for the many functionally illiterate people who encountered them, inscribed columns had also to be recognizable. By choosing a familiar form, those erecting a monument could be assured that their act of commemoration would be understood as such, and the object venerated as a powerful and enduring memorial.<sup>4</sup> By adapting columns as a site for display inscriptions,<sup>5</sup> political actors succeeded in mobilizing the rit-

<sup>3</sup> Contrast this attitude with Lawrence Keppie's concise statement regarding Roman inscriptions: "The most important thing to remember about any Roman inscription is that it is inscribed on something." Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 11. To this should be added the notion of spatial setting, as articulated by Jacques van der Vliet in his study on monastic inscriptions from Egypt: "All epigraphy is witness to the interaction between space and text. Inscriptions are texts meant for a particular spatial setting; outside of this context they are practically meaningless." Jacques van der Vliet, "Kellia and Monastic Epigraphy," in *Christianity and Monasticism in Northern Egypt: Beni Suef, Giza, Cairo, and the Nile Delta*, ed. Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2017), 193–200, esp. 195.

<sup>4</sup> The practices of reuse and reappropriation of columns is a further indication of how they continued to live and be valued over time. See Finbarr B. Flood, "Pillars, Palimpsests, and Princely Practices: Translating the Past in Sultanate Delhi," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 95–116.

<sup>5</sup> Following Adam T. Smith and Paul Zimansky, we use the term "display inscriptions" to designate epigraphs intended for the glorification of a particular ruler that emphasize building projects and the socialization of civic spaces as integral to the ruler's political self-styling. Adam T. Smith, *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities*

ual and religious potency of the objects in the service of their own agendas. Further, the integration of monumental inscribed columns in the physical terrain contributed a built intervention that significantly transformed the spatial experience of the landscape and human interactions with and within it.<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to access some of the primary ways in which premodern actors imagined and engaged with columns and their structural antecedents, the first half of the article engages a diverse body of literary and material sources. Within the sphere of popular religious practices, the association between columns and deities called *yakṣas* comes to the fore. Narratives and images depict these solid supports as animated by figures carved upon their surfaces and by deities who had taken up residence within them. In the political landscape, columns appear as boundary markers, imposing instantiations of military might and territorial expansion that memorialize the favorable outcome of a battle. Finally, the column is imagined as a banner or military insignia, topped with an image with a great deal of ritual power. The image on top could vary, but the function of the object remained stable—it was emblematic of a deity and the power of that deity wielded by the bearer. While inscriptions typically describe the columns in terms of one of these types, it is likely that for the viewer, who may or may not have been privy to the textual interpretation, the object evoked a range of meanings. The power of the column is its ability to summon these multiple meanings in a single, highly charged material form.

The second half of the study uses archeological sources and evidence gathered during recent fieldwork to recover the position and functions of monumental inscribed columns within particular built landscapes where they were defining features—these include Besnagar, Sindhni, and Eran in the Northern Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and Mahakuta and Pattadakal located in the Southern state of Karnataka.<sup>7</sup> Since each of these sites merits focused study, the discursive possibilities of the case studies are certainly not exhausted here. The goal is not a comprehensive treatment but is rather to outline and

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 161–62; P. E. Zimansky, “Urtartian Geography and Sargon’s Eighth Campaign,” *Journal of Near East Studies* 49, no. 1 (1990): 1–21.

<sup>6</sup> On this function of inscriptions, see Smith, *Political Landscape*, 160–83; and Tamara Sears, *Worldly Gurus and Spiritual Kings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 45–72. A striking parallel from China is offered in Robert E. Harrist’s work on *moya* inscriptions, which literally transform the experience of the landscape by being inscribed on the natural rock: “I interpret these inscriptions as part of the history of how, through the medium of the written word, the Chinese have transformed geological formations into landscapes imbued with literary, ideological, and religious significance. . . . To study inscriptions from this perspective, however, requires methods of analysis that are quite different from those that have informed most earlier studies of writing on stone in China.” Robert E. Harrist Jr., *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 18, 19.

<sup>7</sup> On-site research is essential to this project’s aim of recovering the contexts in which the columns were used and experienced. We gathered material for the case studies over three field seasons in India between 2014 and 2017.

demonstrate a method that will allow us to better understand the dynamics of humans and objects through close attention to the temporal, spatial, and social contexts in which they interacted. The selection of these places as examples was based on a set of key criteria. These are sites where columns survive in situ or their original position can be reconstructed based on reliable documentation.<sup>8</sup> The columns were part of broader ritual and memorial landscapes that occupied the heart of early polities. Finally, these locales represent a diverse geographic and chronological range that provides the comparanda necessary to explore the ways in which a widely recognizable cultural form was deployed strategically to suit the needs of particular agents and contexts.

#### RITUAL POTENCY AND ACCRUED MEANING

Far more than text-bearing objects or elite proclamations of power, columns were part of a larger continuum of ritually efficacious objects thought to be enlivened by spirits and deities. As such, these highly charged material agents were the foci of sustained religious practices that addressed fundamental concerns cutting across social and gender hierarchies—for example, health, wealth, power, and protection.<sup>9</sup> The widespread adoption, and apparent success, of the inscribed column as a mode of political display was conditioned by the ritual and religious potency of these objects in popular religious culture,<sup>10</sup> a potency that could be strategically adapted for use as a vehicle for political ideology. It is significant to note that all of the monuments discussed in this study were under active worship when first documented by archeologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> That these columns continued to be engaged as potent ritual objects and sites of meaningful social interaction across centuries challenges the sentiments of early epigraphists, who understood ritual engagement with the monuments as a naive misrecognition of a column's primary function as a text-bearing object.

Yet, attempting to understand the position of the column in popular religious practice poses an additional set of challenges. For rather than doctrines or explicitly held beliefs expressed in normative registers of cultural production, these practices were largely tacit forms of knowledge, the contours of

<sup>8</sup> Given that physical terrain and monumental landscapes change over time, these efforts at contextualization are approximations. In addition to fieldwork, we incorporate perspectives from early excavation and survey reports, travelogues, and photographic archives.

<sup>9</sup> On material agency, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Following David Frankfurter, we understand local or popular religion as oriented around tradition, quotidian values, and pragmatic concerns. "Religious culture" designates the complex of such traditions. David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 179.

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the Sindhni columns, which were partially buried when J. F. Fleet discovered them.

which must be deduced or accessed obliquely, since they did not themselves constitute an ideology. Scholars of material culture in anthropology and archaeology have done much to develop a language to describe the tensions and interactions of such tacit and strategic modes of engaging with objects.<sup>12</sup> This project draws upon this body of scholarship to situate interactions with columns within a larger repertoire of culturally embedded, embodied, and habituated practices.

#### ANIMATING OBJECTS

Carved panels from the *stūpa* railings at Sanchi and Bharhut suggest that early Buddhist communities had well understood the potential of columns to materialize a variety of associations, depending upon how they were deployed. Multiple images from both sites show groups of figures venerating columns topped with the wheel emblematic of the Buddha's teachings (*dharmacakra*) (fig. 1a). Here the message is straightforward: the column serves as a support for the Buddhist symbol, suggesting that the devotees are venerating the Buddha and his dharma. Yet, when viewed in their larger contexts, these images evoke a wider set of practices related to the veneration of powerful deities called *yakṣas*. Ambivalent figures who animated trees, *yakṣas* were integrated within a sphere of ritual pragmatics oriented around concerns for fertility, wealth, the protection of children, and other quotidian concerns.

For example, one such *dharmacakra*-column panel at Sanchi is given an additional layer of meaning when viewed together with the two panels directly below (fig. 1b and c). The bottom-most image shows a hunched couple cradling small children while menacing figures, likely *yakṣas*, lurk behind them. The image above depicts religious activity surrounding a tree, its branches heavy with garlands and the trunk surrounded by a railing that demarcates the ritual space.<sup>13</sup> Reading these images in dialogue suggests that the veneration of the Buddhist dharma, represented by the column, provides an efficacious alternative to the popular practice of propitiating *yakṣas* and other spirit-beings thought to reside in trees.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Key perspectives and development of these discussion are summarized in Ian Hodder, "Introduction," in *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (West Sussex: John Wiley, 2012), 1–13.

<sup>13</sup> Noting a similar set of associations, Ananda Coomaraswamy comments, "Women, accustomed to invoke the blessings of a tree spirit, would approach the railing pillar images with similar expectations." Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas* (1928, 1931; Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Other examples from the Mathura and Allahabad Museums similarly place the column at the center of scenes of circumambulation and make it the focus of reverential gestures. These images are intriguing, and while we lack specific details about the practices being performed, they suggest that the *dharmacakrastambha* was a particular instantiation of a form with a wider appeal as ritual object.



FIG. 1.—Sculpted panels (*a*, *b*, and *c*) from Sanchi *stūpa* railing. Photo by authors.





FIG. 1.—(Continued)

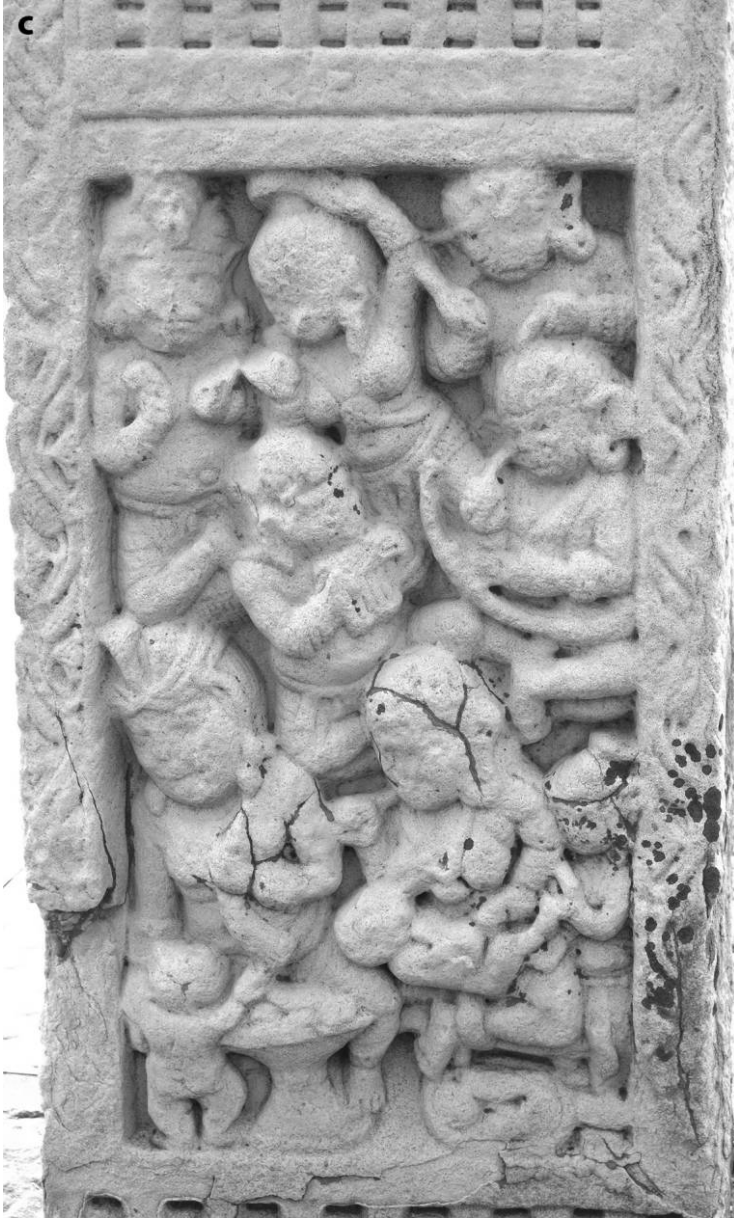


FIG. 1.—(Continued)



Just as they could animate a tree, *yakṣas* could also animate columns. This possibility is suggested by an image from the *stūpa* at Bharhut, which shows the head of a figure peeking out from behind the swag draped across the top of a column (fig. 2). The Bharhut image recalls a passage from the *Maṇimekalai*, a Tamil poem of the sixth century, in which the young heroine receives consul and protection from a *yakṣa* residing in a pillar, who describes himself as one of many such enlivened objects in the city. Here he introduces himself: “I am one of the many gods, Tuvatikaṇ by name. As of old, this column has been appointed as my place by Mayaṇ, the divine artisan. I never leave it.”<sup>15</sup>

Episodes from the eleventh-century *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Ocean of the Rivers of Stories) also play on this association in passages that suggest that the beautiful women whose carved figures emerge in lifelike detail on pillars are tantalizingly real.<sup>16</sup> In the following verses we find that a beautiful image of a goddess carved on a pillar in the Mahākāla temple inspires a female deity (called a *vidyādhari*) to enter it. “Then . . . a certain daughter of the Vidyā-dharas came there to worship Mahākāla, and saw the goddess on the pillar. After inferring the presence of the goddess from its craftsmanship, she performed worship, and unseen she entered that stone pillar to rest.”<sup>17</sup> Later in the narrative, this female deity spies a handsome man visiting the temple and stretches her hand out from the object to touch him as he passes by. “Then she came out visibly from the pillar, beautiful in every limb, and she approached, her eyes fixed on his face, and spoke to him.”<sup>18</sup> The literary identification of column and *yakṣa* above find comparable material expression in sculptures. For example, in images from Bharhut, in which the *yakṣa* images carved in low relief upon railing pillars give the impression that these figures are emerging from the structural supports (fig. 3).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Translation by David Shulman, “Dreaming the Self in South India,” in *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43–73, here 54.

<sup>16</sup> J. Ph. Vogel, “The Woman and the Tree or Śālabhañjikā in Indian Literature and Art,” *Acta Orientalia* 7 (1929): 201–31; Phyllis Granoff, “Portraits, Likenesses and Looking Glasses: Some Literary and Philosophical Reflections on Representation and Art in Medieval India,” in *Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch*, ed. Jan Assmann and Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 63–105.

<sup>17</sup> *Kathāsaritsāgara* 37.10–11: “tatas taylor gatavator mahākālārcaṇagatā | vidyādharaśutai-kātra stambhe devīm dadarśa tām || sulakṣaṇatvāt sāṃnidhyaṃ tasyām matvā kṛtārcaṇā | adṛśyā viśramāyaitaṃ śilāstambhaṃ viveśa sā ||.” *The Kathāsaritsāgara of Somadevabhatta*, ed. Pandit Durgāprasād and Kāśināth Pāndurang Parab, 3rd ed. (Bombay: Nirmaya-Sagar Press, 1915). Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are our own.

<sup>18</sup> *Kathāsaritsāgara* 37.21: “atha stambhād vinirgatya sākṣāt sarvāṅgasundarī | tanmukhāsak-tanayanā taṃ jagādopaviśya sā ||.”

<sup>19</sup> That these images were conceived as *yakṣas* is evident both from their iconographic attributes as well as the label inscriptions, which also make the connection explicit. These inscriptions are published in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 2, pt. 2: *Brāhmī Inscriptions from Bhārhut*, ed. H. Lüders (Ootacamund: Archeological Survey of India, 1963), 73–81.



FIG. 2.—Sculpted pillar from Bharhut *stūpa*. Photo from the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) photo archive.



FIG. 3.—Sculpted pillar from Bharhut *stūpa*. Photo from the AIIS photo archive.

Perhaps it was the solid mass of the pillar, echoed in the monumental and imposing nature of many of the larger-than-life *yakṣa* sculptures, that made them a fitting abode for these powerful beings. This connection is certainly suggested by another verse from the *Kathāsaritsāgara* in which the subject, Virūpākṣa, employs a *yakṣa* to guard his wealth: “And he instructed a certain Yakṣa to guard a treasure lying outside the town of Mathurā, [stationed there] like an immovable stone column.”<sup>20</sup>

The visual homology of columns, trees, and the deities that animated them was also expressed through the sculptural adornment of columns with flower garlands or swag, as, for example, in the column from Besnagar (discussed at length in the following section) (fig. 4). These decorations clearly recall the images of garlanded trees repeated throughout the Sanchi railings and evoke the ritual practices implied by these adornments. Other images make the column-tree connection far more explicit. In images preserved at the Lucknow Government Museum columns are shown sprouting flowering branches and fruit from their shafts, while diminutive couples gesture reverently from the base.

#### THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOVEREIGNTY

As monumental freestanding wonders, columns were objects made to be seen, to catch the eye from a distance and overwhelm the viewer at close proximity. As political emblems they were designed to inspire awe and intimidate, while suggesting permanence and stability. The royal practice of erecting these monuments is poetically described in literary sources. In the *Raghuvamśa* (a fifth-century epic poem dedicated to the celebrated Raghu lineage) the eponymous hero is described as erecting victory columns (*jaya-stambhas*) in the course of completing a ritual of royal conquest (*digvijaya*).<sup>21</sup> For Raghu the columns were clearly statements of political power, but a specific register of power as tied to place and a demarcated geography of sovereignty, a kind of material proclamation of sites of victory that defined the royal landscape (*cakravartikṣetra*). “When the master had forcefully uprooted the Vaṅgas, proud because of their fleet, he erected columns of victory in the spaces between the streams of the river Ganges.”<sup>22</sup> In other instances, the col-

<sup>20</sup> *Kathāsaritsāgara* 34.69: “mathurāyām bahiḥsaṃsthaṃ nidhānaṃ sa ca rakṣitum | yakṣaṃ niyuktavān ekaṃ śilāstambhaṃ ivācalam ||.”

<sup>21</sup> Upinder Singh, “The Power of a Poet: Kingship, Empire, and War in Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa*,” *Indian Historical Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 177–98. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription with its *praśasti* of Samudragupta’s *digvijaya* may have provided the model for that of Raghu in the *Raghuvamśa*. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 240–41.

<sup>22</sup> *Raghuvamśa* 4.37: (Vallabhadeva): “vaṅgān utkhāya tarasā netā nausāddhanoddhatān | nicakhāna jayastambhān gaṅgāśrotontareṣu sah ||.” *The Raghupañcikā of Vallabhadeva: Being the Earliest Commentary on the Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa*, vol. 1, ed. Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2003).



FIG. 4.—Embellishment on Besnagar column. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

umns are presented as serving a slightly different function, marking the perimeters or boundaries of a polity. Here the sense is that the column not only proclaims a victory (*jaya*) but also proclaims one's fame and serves as a testament to royal reputation (*kīrti*). "Having thus performed the task of the gods by cutting the Ten-headed (Rāvaṇa), Viśvaksena (Viṣṇu) entered his own body, the support of all the worlds, after establishing both, the Lord of Laṅkā (Bibhīṣaṇa) and the Son of the Wind (Hanuman), on the Southern and the Northern Mountain, like two columns of fame."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Raghuvamśa* 15.103 (Mallinātha): "nivartyaivaṃ daśamukhaśiraśchedakāryaṃ surāṇāṃ viśvaksenaḥ svatanum aviśat sarvalokapraṭiṣṭhām | laṅkānāthaṃ pavanatanayaṃ cobhayaṃ sthāpayitvā



These examples all evoke the column as a victorious memorial and suggest the imposing and highly visible nature of the monuments as connected with military might and pride. Other verses give a better sense of the form and appearance of these monuments, saying something about how they were experienced by the viewer. The first, from the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, is a somewhat curious image—that of a snake arisen from the edge of the sea: “And on the edge of its seashore he set up a column of victory, looking like the King of Snakes, arisen to beg for the safety of the nether region.”<sup>24</sup> The likening of the column to a massive serpent (*nāga*) not only speaks to its size, the smooth round mass of the snake’s body also recalls the smooth highly polished exterior of many early monumental columns. This description also presents a striking perpendicularity; the height of the snake arising from the flat plane of the earth recalls the massive stone columns arising from the ground without any visible supports. A related verse from the ninth-century Pathari Pillar inscription, which records the building of a temple of Viṣṇu and the setting up of a column, similarly likens the object to the body of the snake king. It adds to the image the fancy that the body of Śeṣa in the form of the column is being pulled up by Garuḍa, Viṣṇu’s eagle. Here the gods gaze in awe upon the column. “Is this Viṣṇu’s foot making three strides, or the body of the ‘Immovable’ Śiva in the form of a pillar, or the serpent Śeṣa pulled out of a hole in the ground by the eagle Garuḍa, the enemy of the snakes? Examining it thoroughly, the gods realize that it is, in fact, a column made of bright polished stone, conferring fame upon Parabala, the protector of the earth.”<sup>25</sup>

Other verses call to mind the external decorations of the columns. The first, again from the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, refers specifically to an inscribed column or the visual impression of inscribed text on a smooth round surface. But rather than a single inscription, this verse describes a monument covered with writing, suggesting the phenomenon of reuse and the practice of inscribing multiple epigraphs on a single object as seen on the inscribed column from

kīrtistambhadvayam iva girau dakṣiṇe cottare ca ||.” *The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, with the commentary of Mallīnātha*, ed. Gopal Raghunath Nandargikar (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971). Verse 17 from the Bilhari Stone Inscription (ca. 975 CE) seems to have the *Raghuvamśa*’s sense of the *kīrtistambha* in mind: “jītvā kṛtsnām yena pṛthvīm apūrvam kīrtistambhadvandvam āropyate sma | kaumbhodbhavyāṃ diśy asau kṛṣṇarājaḥ kauberyām ca śrīnidhir Bhojadevaḥ ||.” (Having conquered the whole earth, he (Kokalladeva) erected two unique columns of fame: the [famous] Kṛṣṇarāja in the quarter of Agastya (south), and Bhojadeva the receptacle of fortune in the quarter of Kubera (north)). V. V. Mishra, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 4, pt. 1: *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era* (Ootacamund: Government Epigraphist for India, 1955), 204–23. Translation by the authors.

<sup>24</sup> *Kathāsaritsāgara* 3.5.91: “tasya velātaṭānte ca jayastambhaṃ cakāra saḥ | pātālābhaya-yāncārthaṃ nāgarājam ivodgatam ||.”

<sup>25</sup> Pathari Pillar Inscription, verse 27: “Viṣṇoḥ kiṃ caraṇas trivikramakṛteḥ stambhākṛter vṛvā vapuḥ, sthānora bhūvivara[rā]t phaṇḍraripunā śeṣo thavaḥ proddhṛtaḥ | itthaṃ bhūri vi[cāra] yadbhir amarair ālokya ni[śc]ityate, stambhaḥ śuddhaśilāmayaḥ Parava(ba)la[kṣmā]pālakīrti-pradaḥ ||.” Edition: L. F. Kielhorn, “Pathari Pillar Inscription of Parabala; [Vikrama-] Saṃvat 917,” *Epigraphia Indica*, 9:248–56.



FIG. 5.—Inscribed column excavated at Kosambi. Photo from the Kern Collection, Leiden University.

Kosambi (fig. 5). “May Gaṇapati protect you, throwing up his trunk in play, round which plays a swarm of bees like a column of fame covered with rows of letters, for the removal of obstacles!”<sup>26</sup> The second example, from the *Raghuvamśa*, does not refer to words or letter directly, but to a surface effaced by the tusks of war elephants. The surfaces of columns often contained many different kinds of markings and carved embellishments in addition to the primary display inscription. This verse gives a poetic impression of these markings: “There he made mount Trikūṭa itself the lofty column of victory, with the records of his exploits displayed by the scratches left by the tusks of his war elephants.”<sup>27</sup>

#### THE DHVAJA AS EMBLEMATIC OBJECT

In addition to the columns’ function as a highly visible instantiation of fame and victory installed permanently in the earth, inscriptions and literary sources

<sup>26</sup> *Kathāsaritsāgara* 68.1: “avyād vo vighnavidhvaṃsakīrtistambham ivotkṣipan | karaṃ gaṇapatiḥ krīḍālinabhrṅgākṣarāvalim ||.”

<sup>27</sup> *Raghuvamśa* 4.61 (Vallabhadeva): “mahebharadanotkīrṇavyaktavikramalakṣaṇam | trikūṭam eva tatrocceair jayastambhaṃ cakāra saḥ ||.”

also liken the columns to monumental reflexes of the *dhvaja* or *ketu*—the military insignia or banner that served as a portable ritual object. The objects consisted of a long pole topped with a crowning image. The *dhvaja* thus serves as a kind of pedestal or support for the object or image atop the pole. In this way, the object/image becomes highly visible, elevated above the head of the rider or soldier carrying it to herald the approach and signal the affiliation of those who carried it. Images from Sanchi and Bharhut give a good sense of what these objects would have looked like when carried in procession (fig. 6). Of course, deities, too, are described as having these insignia, Viṣṇu the eagle and Śiva the bull (fig. 7). The *dhvaja* as an emblem of religious identity and superiority comes across forcefully in this remarkable verse from a *dharmacakra*-column inscription of Nagarjunakonda that describes the Buddha's emblem as defeating those of his religious competitors. "The banner of pride of the one with *makara*-banner (= Kāma) was not felled by the one with bull-banner (= Śiva). It has been felled by the descendant of the Śākya family (= Buddha) by means of this wheel born together with the dharma."<sup>28</sup> The heraldic function of the *dhvaja* is conveyed clearly in the verse below from the circa seventh-century *Śiśupālavadha* (The killing of Śiśupāla)—it signals the site of Kṛṣṇa's military camp to the soldiers approaching. The mention of Kṛṣṇa's eagle banner as being smeared with turmeric paste and thus gold in color hints at another aspect of the *dhvaja* that is critical for this study: it is a ritual object anointed with the same unguents used for images in the temple sanctum. "The other kings understood where to stop for lodging by the lofty Garuda banner near Krishna's encampment; its emblem was a wriggling snake skewered by a sharp beak, its pennant peacock plumage, gold-colored with turmeric paste."<sup>29</sup>

The *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, a sixth-century astrological treatise, similarly reflects on the power of the *dhvaja*. In this instance, the object is described as imbued with the power of a deity, a power that, by association, infuses the person who carried it. In the passage below the *dhvaja* is a manifestation of Viṣṇu's divine martial energy (*tejas*) and the object that occasions the god Indra's victory

<sup>28</sup> Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa 104 (inscription dated to the eighteenth year of Rudrapuruṣadatta), verse. 2: "darppaddhvajo yo makaraddhvajasya, na pātito govṛṣabhaddhvajena | tair pāditarīṇ śakkyakuloddhvajena, imena cakkrena sadharmmajena ||." Edition and translation: Stefan Baums, Arlo Griffiths, Ingo Strauch, and Vincent Tournier, "Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa: Results of fieldwork in January and February 2016," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 102 (2016): 355–98. See also Oskar von Hinüber, "Behind the Scenes: The Struggle of Political Groups for Influence as Reflected in Inscriptions," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 56, nos. 3–4 (2013): 365–79, here 366–67.

<sup>29</sup> *Śiśupālavadha* 5.13: "bibhrāṇayā bahulajāpakapaṅkapiṅgapicchāvacūlamanumādhava-dhāma jajñuḥ | cañvagraḍaṣṭacaṭulāhipatākayānye svāvāsabhāgam uragāśanaketuyaṣṭyā ||." Edition and translation: Paul Dundas, *The Killing of Shishupala* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). For "Garuda banner" the Sanskrit original has *uragāśanaketuyaṣṭi*, "the staff whose insignia is the Snake-Eater."

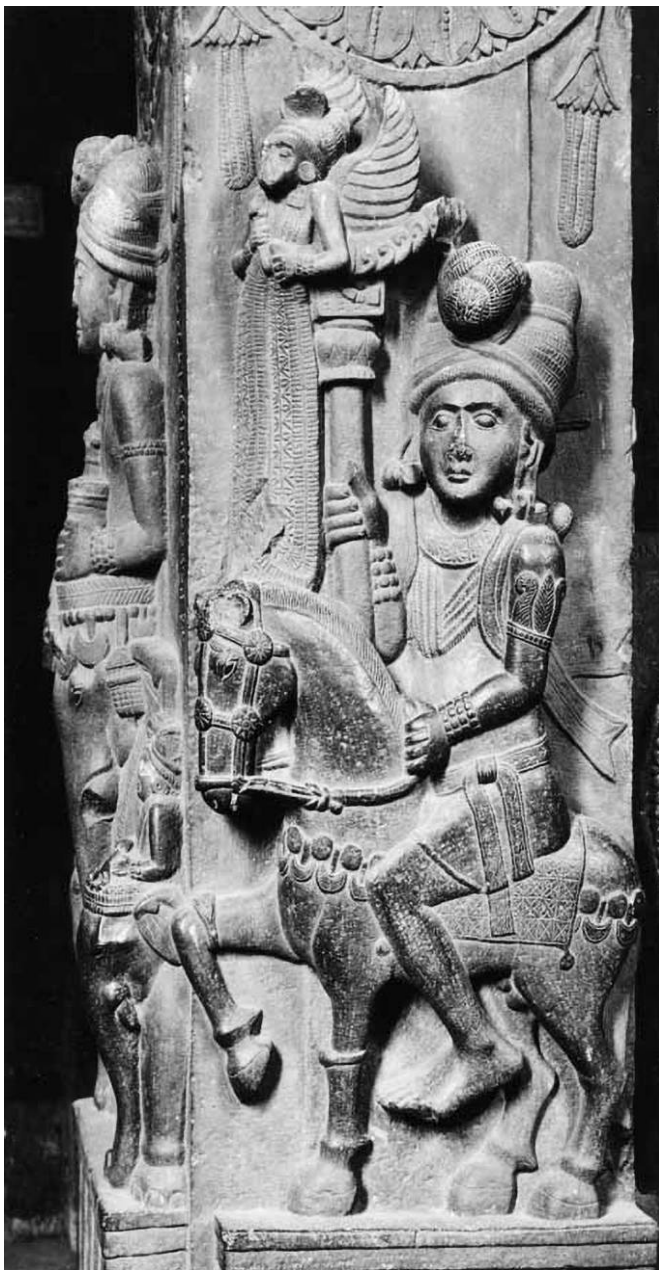


FIG. 6.—Sculpted pillar from Bharhut *stūpa* showing rider with *dhvaja*. Photo from the AIIS photo archive.



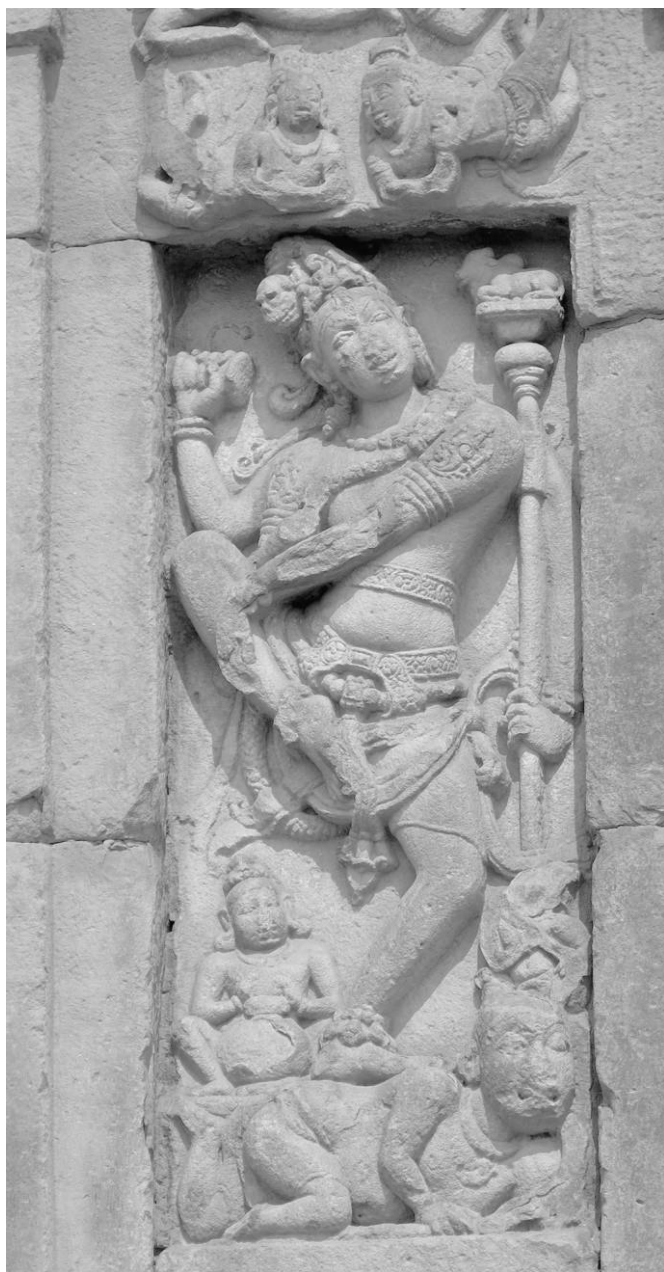


FIG. 7.—Dancing Śiva at Pattadakal with bull-topped *dhvaja* in proper left hand.  
Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.



over demons. Like Kṛṣṇa's *garuḍa* banner, Indra's standard is also adorned as a ritual object.

Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) was pleased with their praise, and he gave them a banner, which was like the sun and the moon [respectively] to the lotus-faces of the wives of the gods and demons.

Having received that banner, which was born from Viṣṇu's splendor and placed on the gleaming eight-wheeled chariot with many jewels, shining brightly like the sun in autumn, Indra was delighted.

The Lord of the gods destroyed the army of the enemies in battle with the raised-up banner, which was adorned with wreaths of little bells and furnished with garlands, umbrellas, bells and baskets.<sup>30</sup>

Vivid and detailed descriptions of the staff and crowning element in other verses from popular narrative literature underscore the ritual power of these objects. They are animated and possess a power that both astonishes and intimidates the onlooker. In an example from the epic *Mahābhārata*, Arjuna's resplendent banner is topped with a monkey that is described as divine (*divya*) and surrounded by beasts whose cries strike fear into his enemies. "A splendid banner-pole, like Indra's rainbow, made of gold, shining brightly and supreme, was attached to that best of chariots. Residing on top of it there shone a divine monkey, marked with the signs of lion and tiger, which seemed to roar out. On the banner were various large creatures whose roars made the enemies' armies swoon."<sup>31</sup> Given the power and prestige accorded to these objects, it is perhaps not surprising that their loss resulted in a loss of power for the bearer. Like the *aquila* in the Roman context, so intimate was the connection between warrior and banner that the destruction or loss of a *dhvaja* signaled defeat. And for those pretenders to power, like Pauṇḍra in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, the appropriation of another's insignia could have deadly consequences. In this passage Viṣṇu punishes king Pauṇḍra who tried to impersonate the god by adopting his insignia. "The Lord said: "Pauṇḍra, I will bring about what you have communicated to me through your messenger, namely that I should give up my insignia. I hand over this discus. I hand over this mace to you. I instruct this Garuḍa [of mine] to

<sup>30</sup> *Brhatsaṃhitā* 42.5–7: "taiḥ saṃstutaḥ sa devas tutoṣa nārāyaṇo dadau caiśāṃ | dhvajam asurasuravadhūmukhakamalavanatuśāratikṣṇāṃśum || taṃ viṣṇutejobhavam aṣṭacakre rathe sthitaṃ bhāsvati ratnacitre | dedīpyamānaṃ śaradīva sūryaṃ dhvajam samāsādy mumoda śakraḥ | sa kinkijālāparīṣkṛteṇa śrakchatraghaṇṭāpīṭakānvitena | samucchritenāmararāḍ dhvajena ninye vināśaṃ samare 'risainyam ||." *Brhatsaṃhitā*, ed. A. V. Tripāthī (Varanasi: Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya, 1968).

<sup>31</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.225.12–14: "āśritā taṃ rathaśreṣṭhaṃ śakrāyudhasamā śubhā | tāpaniṃyā surucirā dhvajayaṣṭir anuttamā || tasyāṃ tu vānaro divyaḥ śiṃhaśārdūlalakṣaṇaḥ | vinardann iva tatrasthaḥ saṃsthito murdhny aśobhata || dhvaje bhūtāni tatrāsan vīvidhāni mahānti ca | nādena ripusainyānāṃ yeṣāṃ saṃjñā prapaśyati ||." *The Mahābhārata*, crit. ed. V. S. Sukhtankar et al. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1927–59).

mount your standard.” Speaking thus, he [Pauṇḍra] was torn asunder by the discharged discus, destroyed by the club, and the Garuḍa [on his banner] was broken by the [Lord’s] Garuḍa.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, a passage from the *Pādatāḍitaka* (The Kick), a Gupta-period play set in Ujjain, beautifully illustrates how the deity’s banner pole established in a temple setting would have been subject to ritual use.<sup>33</sup> Here we meet a courtesan who circumambulates the banner of the god Kāma, consisting of a pole topped by a crocodile (*makara*): “this is the ancient courtesan called Dhārani-gupta. She has petitioned the deity in Kama’s temple, and now she circumambulates the Mākara-post, putting back on her shoulder her flopping hair, white as a blossoming sugarcane, wearing freshly washed clothes, replacing on her shoulder the cloak that has slipped down, and casting a sidelong glance at the dancing peacock surrounded by crows that alighted when the *bali*-offering was laid out.”<sup>34</sup>

#### CASE STUDIES: COLUMNS IN CONTEXT

The literary and visual references presented above have illuminated some of the semantic range that the form and elements of the columns evoke. Situating the practice of erecting and inscribing columns within broader repertoires of ritual and memorialization shows clearly that we are not dealing with pure innovation but rather with strategic adaptations of a recognizable monumental form. This second section of the study focuses on five pivotal moments in the development of column practices. These cases give some sense of how the use of inscribed columns evolved over time, as those employing the form become increasingly skilled in adapting the monuments for strategic purposes. Simile and metaphor were employed poetically to capitalize on the seemingly

<sup>32</sup> *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 5.34.22–24: “bhagavān uvāca: pauṇḍroktam tvayā yat tu dūtavaktreṇa mām prati | samutsrjeti cihnāni tat te sampādayāmy aham || cakram etat samutsrṣtam gadeyaṁ te visarjitā | garutmān eṣa nirdiṣṭaḥ samārohatu te dhvajam || ity uccārya vimuktēna cakreṇāsau vidārītaḥ | pothito gadayā bhagno garutmānś ca garutmatā ||.” *Viṣṇupurāṇam*, crit. ed. M. M. Pathak (Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1997–99). The context of this passage is that king Pauṇḍra regarded himself as Vāsudeva come to earth and took on his insignia.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the examples from early narrative literature discussed here, we may also mention the ceremonies of the raising and lowering of the deity’s banner in the form of the flag-pole at temple festivals. For a medieval account, see Aghoraśiva’s elaborate description of the ceremonies involving the deity’s banner in his *Mahotsavavidhi. A Priest’s Guide for the Great Festival: Aghoraśiva’s Mahotsavavidhi*, translated with an introduction and notes by Richard H. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63–83, 120–22.

<sup>34</sup> “Pādatāḍitaka: eṣā hi purāṇapumṣcalī dharaṇiguptā nāma kāmadvēyatanād devatāyā upayācitam nirvartya sphuṭitakāśavallārīśvetam āgalitam aṁsadeśād upari keśahastam vinyasyantī sadyodhautanivasanā vīgalitam uttariyam ekāṁṣe pratisamādadhānā balivikṣepopanipatitair balibhrtaiḥ parivṛtam mayūram nrtyantam apāṅgenāvalokayantī makarayaṣṭim pradakṣiṇīkaroti.” *The Quartet of Causeries*, by Śyāmilaka, Vararuci, Śūdraka & Īśvaradatta, ed. and trans. Csaba Dezső and Somdev Vasudeva (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 38–41.

inexhaustible symbolic potential of the object. This adaptability was, however, anchored by certain references and associations that were repeatedly invoked. The Heliodoros column in Besnagar marks the starting point: the inception of the monumental column as *dhvaja* and the marking of this object with a commemorative inscription. While the commemorative function of the column observed in the Besnagar exemplar continues, the rhetorical and ideological use of the form becomes increasingly sophisticated. Examples from the Gupta site of Eran and the Aulikara site of Sondhni shed a new light on the adaptation of the columns for political purposes and their place within royal ritual and memorial sites. The final two cases address columns erected at sites further south, Mahakuta and Pattadakal in the Cālukya-controlled areas of Karnataka. These Cālukya cases represent a high point and convergence of the commemorative, ritual, and political functions of the object.

#### DEBUT OF THE *DHVAJA*: BESNAGAR

The inscribed second-century BCE column of Heliodoros located at the ancient site of Besnagar in central Madhya Pradesh is not the first of its kind, yet there is something innovative about it. The monument needs no introduction for students of early Indian history. It is commonly cited as a testament to cultural exchange, since it records the Greek promotion of a localized South Asian religious cult.<sup>35</sup> What the historiography has not yet considered, is the connection between the social function of the object and its material reality. This materiality is significant since the Heliodoros column was not only a text-bearing object, but a potent symbol and ritual object as well. Here we can see for the first time the convergence of monumental, ritual, and commemorative valences of the object within a Brahmanical context.

The inscription, engraved at eye level on the east-facing side of the column, tells of the visit of the Greek envoy Heliodoros to king Kāśīputra Bhāgabhadra and his erection of a *garuḍadhvaja* of the god Vāsudeva. The text is brief and straightforward: “This Garuḍa-banner of Vāsudeva, the god of gods, was constructed here by Heliodora [Hēliodōros], the Bhāgavata, son of Diya [Diyōn], of Takhkhasilā (Taxila), the Greek ambassador who came from the Great King Aṃtalikita [Antialkidas] to King Kāśīputra [Kāśīputra] Bhāgabhadra, the Savior, prospering in (his) fourteenth regnal year.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 216–17; Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 69, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 265–67: “[de]vadevasa v[ā][\*sude]vasa garuḍadhvaje ayaṃ kārīt[e] i[a?] heliodoreṇa bhāgavatena diyasa putreṇa ta[khkha]silākena yonadūtena āgatena mahārājasa aṃtalikitasā upa[m]tā

Although the Besnagar column may appear to be an echo of earlier forms—for example, the Aśokan monuments that preceded it—its form, subject, and context have no known precedent. The Aśokan monuments were self-conscious monumental expressions of power and markers of territorial expansion, couched in a Buddhist rhetoric. By contrast, the Heliodoros column is conspicuously devoid of hyperbole and textual rhetoric of any kind. As an object, too, this column differs from the Aśokan predecessors. In the inscriptions that survive on Aśokan pillars the text most often describes the object in literal terms as a “stone column” (*silāthaṃbha*).<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the Besnagar inscription marks a significant shift in the rhetorical use of the form through homology. The inscription records Heliodoros’s erection of a *garuḍadhvaja* with no reference to the empirical identity of the stone column. This is the earliest known epigraphic reference to the *garuḍadhvaja* and the first to imagine it on a monumental scale.<sup>38</sup> Recalling the totemic function and ritual potency of the *dhvaja*, the representation of this emblem marks a significant moment in the emergent Brahmanical religious culture.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to introducing a new symbolic reading of the object, the context in which the inscribed column was displayed is also unique. In the historiography, the Besnagar column is pictured as a discrete monument without reference to the larger setting in which it was situated. This impression is reinforced further by the curation of the current protected site in which the pillar stands isolated, surrounded by a square pedestal, with a few architectural fragments and images of various periods laying scattered beneath a nearby tree (fig. 8). Presently only the shaft and the abacus of the column survive. The crowning element is missing, but we can deduce from the inscription that it should have been topped by an image of Garuḍa, likely as an eagle rather

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sakāsaṃ rañño kāsīput[r]asa bhāgabhadrasa trātārasa vasena ca[tu]dasena rājena vadhamānasa.” The translation is that of Salomon, except that he renders *garuḍadhvaja* with “Garuḍa-pillar.” Making *dhvaja*, which really is a banner, a synonym for pillar is not truly accurate here.

<sup>37</sup> K. R. Norman, “Aśokan *silā-thaṃbha*-s and *dhaṃma-thaṃbha*-s,” in *Ācārya-Vandanā. D. R. Bhandarkar Birth Centenary Volume*, ed. Samaresh Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1984), 311–18. The only exception is pillar edict VII (Delhi-Toprā), where Aśoka refers to the monument as a “column of dharma” (*dhaṃmathaṃbha*), which we may interpret both as an acknowledgment of the normative contents of the inscription, as well as a gesture to the symbolic function of the object.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen Raven, *Gupta Gold Coins with a Garuḍa-Banner (Samudragupta to Skandagupta)* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), 23–24. Although it is possible that there were other contemporaneous examples that are now lost.

<sup>39</sup> A second-century CE column from Dharaṇikoṭa in Andhra Pradesh refers to itself as *dhamacakadhaya* (Skt. *dharmacakradhvaja*), one of the earliest known examples of the reference in a Buddhist context (*Epigraphia Indica* 24:256–60). Sculpted images of *cakra*-topped columns, like those from Bharhut and Sanchi mentioned earlier, adorn early Buddhist *stūpa* sites, but these epigraphic examples mark a further development whereby visual metaphors are translated into literary metaphors.



FIG. 8.—Site of Heliodoros column at Besnagar. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

than the anthropomorphic form observed in later examples (as at Eran, see below).<sup>40</sup>

This scenario of an isolated monument is complicated by the excavation reports, which detail a significantly more complex setting (fig. 9). Scholarly understanding of the Besnagar site and the place of the inscribed column within it has evolved slowly, from the earliest reports of John Marshall (1908–9) and Alexander Cunningham (1877) and the subsequent excavations at the site by M. D. Khare (1963–65), which expanded significantly on the stratigraphy of the site.<sup>41</sup> The earliest discernible layer revealed a small elliptical structure taken to be an early Vaiṣṇava temple that Khare dated as early as the third or fourth century BCE.<sup>42</sup> This modest shrine formed the nucleus of a site that expanded to encompass an area of roughly 33 × 33 meters that was further

<sup>40</sup> Meera I. Dass, “Heliodorus Pillar from Besnagar: Its Capital and Worship,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay* 77–78 (2014): 31–41.

<sup>41</sup> For a summary report of the findings from these early excavations, see the *Encyclopedia of Indian Archeology* vol. 2, ed. A. Ghosh (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 62.

<sup>42</sup> M. D. Khare, “Discovery of a Viṣṇu Temple Near the Heliodoros Pillar, Besnagar, Dist. Vidisha (M.P.),” *Lalit Kalā* 13 (1967): 21–27, here 25.



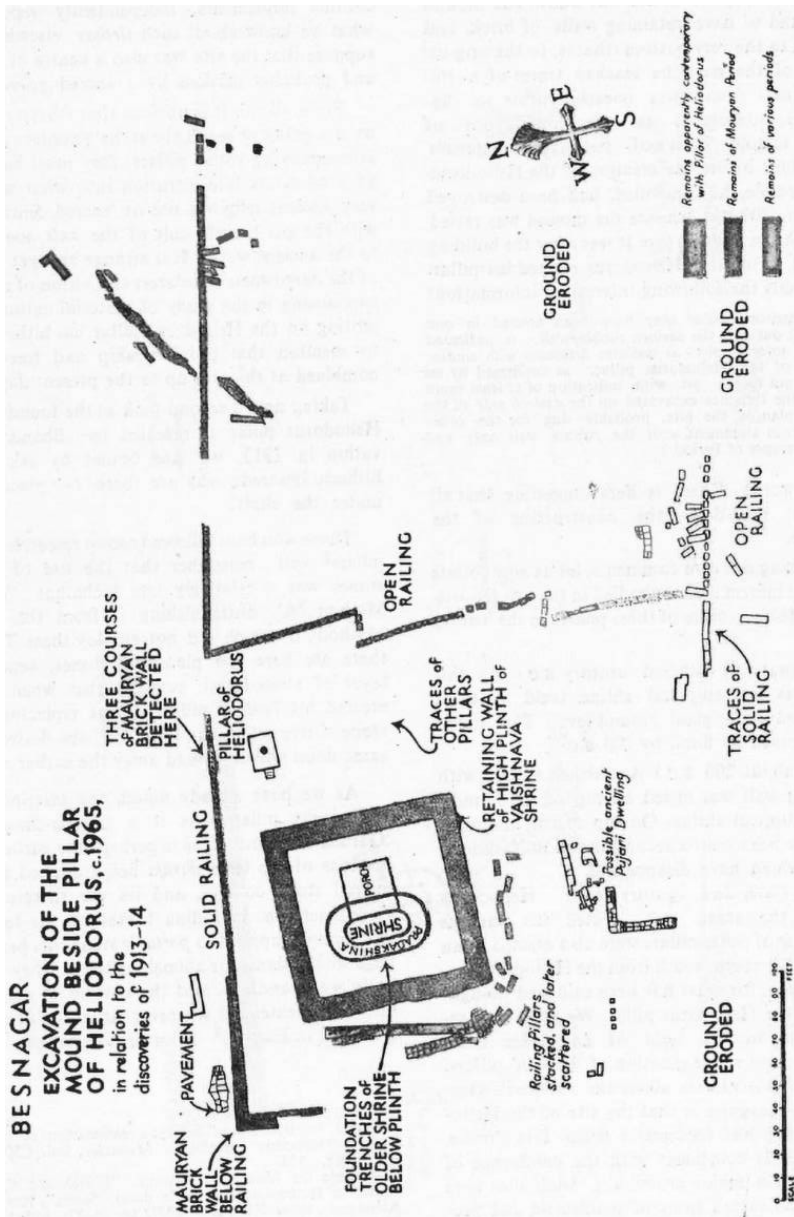


FIG. 9.—Plan of excavated temple site at Besnagar (after John Irwin, "The Heliodorus Pillar at Besnagar," *Purāṇatva* 8 [1975–76]: 166–78). Color version available as an online enhancement.

delimited by a stone railing and larger retaining wall.<sup>43</sup> The structural remains to which the inscribed column is connected represent a later historical moment of the first or second century BCE. Following Khare's reconstruction, the column established by the Greek envoy would have been set up along a large retaining wall on the east side of the temple. Significantly, besides the Heliodoros column, additional pits for seven more columns were discovered.<sup>44</sup> None of the other columns have survived intact, yet a number of capitals found at the site and reported by various historians are a strong indication that Heliodoros's column was one of many such memorials that stood before the temple.

Herbert Härtel has suggested that these objects were intended as iconic *dhvajas* that framed the opening courtyard of a structural temple dedicated to the *pañcavīras* (five heroes), of which the god Vāsudeva mentioned in the column would have been the most prominent one by the time of Heliodoros's visit. Each of the five heroes had his own distinctive *dhvaja*, and there is material evidence from the site of iconic *dhvaja*-columns having been set up for other members of the group.<sup>45</sup> Viewing the column as a single surviving trace of a larger monumental temple landscape involves a reorientation of the site in which it is currently displayed and this recovery of context prompts also a revisioning of the history of both its form and function. From this perspective, the Heliodoros column is no longer simply a monument commemorating the visit of an elite official but an indication of the evolution of memorial and votive practices in an early Brahmanical devotional context, evidence for which is scarce. Some further evidence can be gleaned from a second inscription on the opposite side of the column. While the inscription of Heliodoros's visit is displayed outward, this inscription, of a religious nature, faces the temple. It mentions that there are three steps leading to heaven: control (*dama*), liberality (*cāgatyāga*), and vigilance (*apramāda*).<sup>46</sup> This expression of devotion hints at the religious motivation for undertaking this pious work. Not only has the pillar been seen in isolation from its immediate material surroundings, but the inscription recording the visit has been isolated from the one express-

<sup>43</sup> These measurements are recorded in Khare's excavation report ("Discovery of a Viṣṇu Temple," 22–23). The repeated rebuilding and expansion of the site was, according to Khare's analysis, due to the repeated flooding of the site, which is located between the Betwa and the Bes River.

<sup>44</sup> In an earlier paper Khare mentioned four additional pits, but in a later paper he reports seven additional pits. Khare, "Discovery of a Viṣṇu Temple"; M. D. Khare, "Vidisha's Religious Fervour," *Ancient Ceylon* 3 (1979): 195–201. See also Herbert Härtel, "Archaeological Evidence of the Early Vāsudeva Worship," in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, ed. G. Gnoli and L. Lanciotti (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1987), 573–87, here 577–79.

<sup>45</sup> Härtel, "Archaeological Evidence," 578–80. Among the surviving fragments are the top of a *tāladhvaja* (palm banner) for Saṃkarṣaṇa and a *makaradhvaja* (crocodile banner) for Pradyumna.

<sup>46</sup> Salomon (*Indian Epigraphy*, 267) notices similar proverbial expressions in early literary sources such as the *Dhammapada* and the *Mahābhārata*. See also Rémy Audouin and Paul Bernard, "Trésor de monnaies indiennes et indo-grecques d'Aï-Khanoum (Afghanistan): II. Les monnaies indo-grecques," *Revue numismatique* 16 (1974): 6–41, esp. 15–16.

ing this devotional ideal, which provides insight into the motivation for the construction of the column as a whole.

Having established a more detailed vision of the column's structural context, the challenge is to hypothesize the relationship between the members of the original set, the intentions of the donors in establishing them, and their range of social functions. The inscription tells us quite clearly that Heliodoros commissioned the object on the occasion of his visit to the king Kāśīputra Bhāgabhadra. The function of the column as a monument designed to memorialize these connections between the Greek visitor and his local allies is largely implicit. The recovery of the original setting of the monument raises a number of questions. Was the inscription simply a formal record or announcement of his visit? Did it mark some significant community occasion? And how did the inscribing of the column participate in the religious complex? While these questions may never be answered satisfactorily they should be central to any attempt at coming to terms with the site as a place of lived religion.

#### MEMORIAL LANDSCAPE: ERAN

More than half a millennium after the *garuḍadhvaja* was commissioned by Heliodoros, another magnificent *garuḍadhvaja* was set up at Eran, an ancient town on the south bank of the Bīnā river, about fifty kilometers northeast of Besnagar. Political rhetoric and religious ideology intertwine at Eran in fascinating ways, making this one of the most important sites for the study of early India, and of the Gupta period in particular. Yet, aside from Cunningham's pioneering survey in the late nineteenth century, this site has not yet been explored as an integrated whole, nor do historians have a sense of Eran's position in the larger civic landscape of the Gupta polity.<sup>47</sup> A nuanced study of this region must await a further study; in the meantime, this brief discussion initiates this project. Taking the *garuḍadhvaja* as an orienting point shows how this monumental *dhvaja* functioned as a symbol of kinship, piety, and a crystallization of memory for two brothers navigating the fraught politics of the Gupta age.<sup>48</sup>

The flat fertile plains provided the setting for clashes between opposing sovereigns as well as a crossroads and center of exchange.<sup>49</sup> While little is known

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1874–75 and 1876–77* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1880), 76–90.

<sup>48</sup> J. F. Fleet, "Eran Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta.—The Year 165," in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3: *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888), 88–93. Although the inscription on the column is usually referred to as the Eran Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta, it was in fact not commissioned by the Gupta ruler himself, but by subordinate or local elites whose exact ties to the imperial house are unclear.

<sup>49</sup> Hans Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory: In the Age of the Hunnic Wars, 50 Years That Changed India (484–534)* (Amsterdam: J. Gonda Fund Foundation of the

of the contours of the ancient city itself, extensive monumental remains lie a short distance southeast of the settlement site,<sup>50</sup> where a group of four shrines were clustered within easy access of the riverbank. The surviving sculptures include several imposing sculptures of *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, such as the theriomorphic Boar (Varāha) and the Man-Lion (Narasimha). These images were powerful material expressions of the piety of the local rulers and attest to their participation in the Viṣṇu-centered political ideology promoted by their Imperial Guptas superiors. This participation is evinced clearly in the inscribed column, which is referred to as the banner-column (*dhvajastambha*) of the god Janārdana, an epithet of Viṣṇu. The column bears a nine-line inscription on its west face dated in the Gupta year 165 (484–85 CE), announcing its erection by the *mahārāja* Mātṛviṣṇu and his younger brother Dhanyaviṣṇu for increasing the merit of their parents.<sup>51</sup> In the opening line the god is invoked as the one whose standard is marked by the Garuḍa insignia (*garuḍaketu*), an image that evokes notions of both divine kingship and the patron deity of the Gupta rulers.<sup>52</sup> The column materializes this literary description perfectly. For the stone shaft is crowned with addorsed images of Garuḍa holding a snake in the left hand and facing east and west, respectively. A *dharmacakra* placed between their backs provides a frame for each image (fig. 10).<sup>53</sup>

KNAW, 2017), 9–10. Anne Casile's work sheds important light on Eran's broader archaeological setting. Anne Casile, "Changing Religious Landscapes in Gupta Times: Archaeological Evidence from the Area of Baḍoh-Pathāri in Central India," *South Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (2014): 245–68.

<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the reports of the excavations undertaken at Eran by archeologists of Sagar University have not yet been published.

<sup>51</sup> Fleet, "Eran Pillar Inscription," lines 7–9: "mahārājamātṛviṣṇun[ā] tasyaivānujena tadanuvidhāyin[ā] tatprasādaparigr[hī]tena dhanyaviṣṇunā ca | mātṛpitroḥ puṇyāpyāyanārtham eṣa bhagavataḥ | puṇyajanārdanasya janārdanasya dhvajastambho bhyucchrītaḥ [ | \* ]" (by the *mahārāja* Mātṛviṣṇu and by his younger brother Dhanyaviṣṇu, who is obedient to him (and) accepted with favour by him, this banner-column of the blessed Janārdana, the troubler of the demons, has been erected, for the purpose of increasing the religious merit of (their) parents). Translation: Fleet, "Eran Pillar Inscription," 88, adapted.

<sup>52</sup> Fleet, "Eran Pillar Inscription," lines 1–2: "jayati vibhuś caturbhujāś caturarṇnavavipulasalilaparyyāṅkaḥ jagataḥ sthityutpattinya[yādi]hetur ggaruḍaketuḥ" (Victorious is the lord, the Four-armed one (Viṣṇu), whose couch is the broad waters of the four oceans, who is the cause of the continuance, production, destruction etc. of the universe, whose insignia is Garuḍa!). Translation: Fleet, "Eran Pillar Inscription," 88, adapted.

<sup>53</sup> This arrangement is reminiscent of an episode told in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* about the origin of the *garuḍadhvaja*, which connects it to the old Vedic motif of the theft of the *soma* by the eagle. In *Mahābhārata* 1.29 Garuḍa flies up to heaven to fetch the *soma*, which is protected by a sharp-edged revolving wheel in front. Garuḍa manages to fly through the spokes and then encounters two snakes who are guarding the *soma*. He cuts them through and fetches the *soma*, after which Viṣṇu offers him a boon. Garuḍa asks if he may always stay above him and be immortal even without the *soma*. In return Garuḍa offers Viṣṇu a boon himself. The latter asks him to be his mount (*vāhana*) and he makes a *dhvaja* on top of which Garuḍa may reside. It is plausible that the form of the *garuḍadhvaja* at Eran is somehow connected to this unique episode, which may have been added at a relatively late stage of the composition of the epic. It is also possible to see a representation of Viṣṇu's personified discus (*cakrapuruṣa*) in it, a view put



FIG. 10.—Garūḍa sculpture crowning the column at Eran. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Towering over the landscape at thirteen meters in height, the column would have presided over religious life at the site.<sup>54</sup> Even so, the surviving remains

forward by W. E. Begley, *Viṣṇu's Flaming Wheel: The Iconography of the Sudarśana-Cakra* (New York: New York University Press, 1973), 47.

<sup>54</sup> This measurement is reported in Cunningham, *Report of Tours*, 81 ("43 feet").

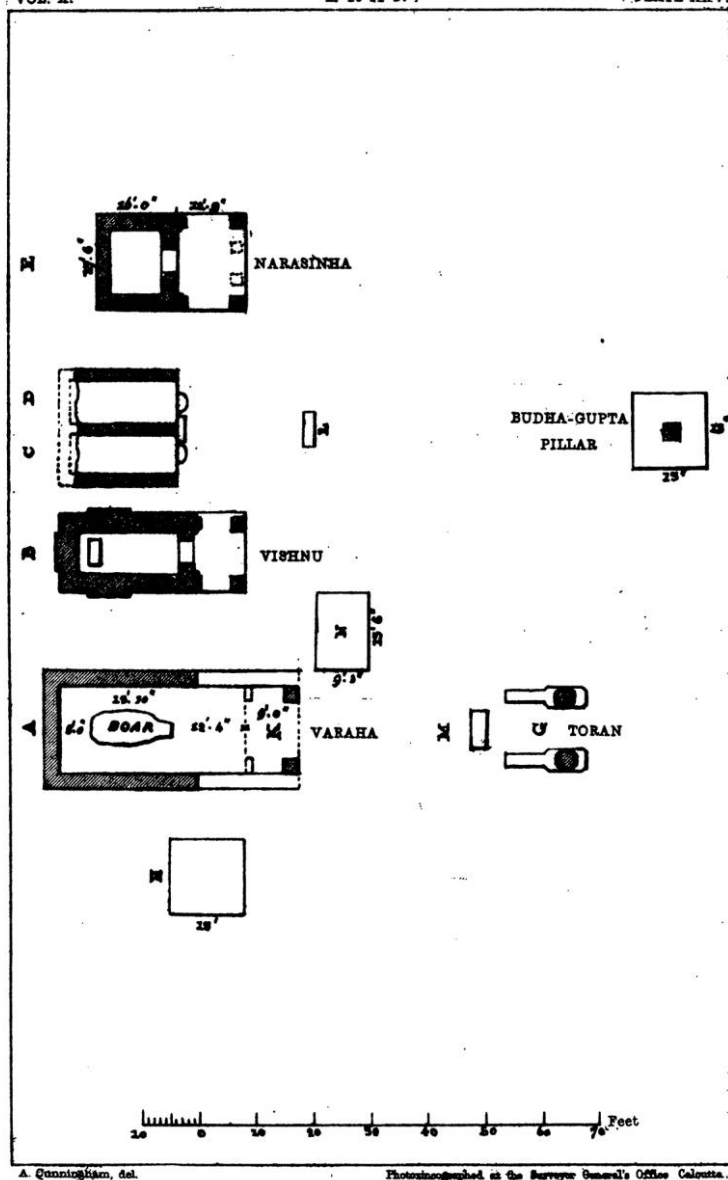


suggest that the column stood in a direct line with one particular temple, a unique shrine comprised of two adjoined cellae that would have housed two deities. The shared wall connecting the two small shrines is exactly in line with the inscribed face of the column. Cunningham also reports his discovery of foundation slabs for an arched gateway that would have framed the shrines, and, for the viewer looking out eastward from the shrines, this arch would have also created a visual frame for the inscribed western face of the column. Understanding the intervisibility of the column and the paired shrines—the monumental nucleus of the site—provides an entrée into the site as a whole (fig. 11).

The remains clearly suggest a close connection between column and temple, yet the inscription makes no explicit mention of the shrine. This absence makes it unlikely that the epigraph was intended as a foundation inscription.<sup>55</sup> What the text does emphasize is the relationship between the two brothers and their role as the visionaries behind the development of this memorial landscape. The act of erecting the column was done for the benefit of their parents, yet the text focuses particular attention on the relationship between these two men.<sup>56</sup> Whatever the real emotions the two shared, the inscription makes explicit that their interactions were peaceable, and that the younger Dhanyaviṣṇu accepted his elder brother's superior status and, in turn, enjoyed Mātṛviṣṇu's affection. While multiple hypotheses could be advanced to explain the relative chronology of the monuments, we hypothesize that the establishment of the column in relation to the shrine reflects an effort to create a visual and spatial resonance between the two brothers and the two enshrined deities, thereby underscoring this fraternity. Who were these deities? To answer this question requires a further move to contextualization. Eran's memorial landscape displays significant echoes of memorial sites within the neighboring Vākāṭaka

<sup>55</sup> Contrast this with the *dhvajastambha* that was established almost two centuries earlier at the Ikṣvāku site of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa by Hārītiputra Virapuruṣadatta and his mother. This records the building of a temple, the erection of a banner-column, as well as the permanent endowment of a village, presumably to provide for the worship in the temple: "śrīvirapuruṣadattena mahārājasya mahādevyā gottrasya ca [v]ijayavaijayike āyurvvarddhane dvayor api ca mātāputrayo[ḥ\*] dhammaphalaṃ bhagavato puṣpabhadrasvāmināḥ devakulaṃ kāritaṃ dhvajastambha(bha)ś ca pratiṣṭhāpitaḥ grāmaś ca puḍokedaṃ akṣayani(nī)vidattaḥ" (śrī-Virapuruṣadatta and the chief wife of the great king have built [this] temple of the blessed Puṣpabhadrasvāmin, and installed [this] banner-column, and given the village Puḍokedaṃ as a permanent endowment, as the fruit of religion of both mother and son for conferring victory on the lineage and a long life; *Epigraphia Indica* 34:17–20, lines 9–10). Most historians, however, have taken the Eran column's inscription to be a foundation inscription; see, e.g., Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*, 9, 27.

<sup>56</sup> For the practice of erecting temples as memorials to transfer merit to the dead in the Gupta-Vākāṭaka period, see Hans T. Bakker, "Monuments to the Dead in Ancient North India," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 50 (2007): 11–47, esp. 19–21. On the concept of transfer of merit in Brahmanical literature, see Minoru Hara, "Transfer of Merit in Hindu Literature and Religion," in *Pāśupata Studies* (Vienna: Sammlung de Nobili, 2002), 105–38.

FIG. 11.—Plan of Eran site (after Cunningham, *Report of Tours*)

polity, such as Nandivardhana and Rāmagiri.<sup>57</sup> The Bhogarāma temple, located on the Rāmagiri, provides illuminating comparanda—this twin shrine was dedicated to the divine brothers Vāsudeva/Kṛṣṇa and Saṃkarṣaṇa/Balarāma, for the merit of two royal brothers, Dāmodarasena and Pravarasena II. As a comparable site for the development of politicized Vaiṣṇavism, it is conceivable that the Eran complex included a shrine to these divine brothers as well. In this scenario, the column of Mātṛviṣṇu and Dhanyaviṣṇu perfectly capitalizes on the religious symbolism of the site by expressing the relationship between these local rulers through a Vaiṣṇava archetype.

The saga of the two brothers and their creation of Eran's memorial landscape continues in a second famous inscription found at the site. It is engraved on the chest of a massive theriomorphic image of Viṣṇu's Boar manifestation (fig. 12). This inscription employs some of the very same phraseology introduced in the column to describe the brothers' relation to each other, while the temple housing the image is likewise dedicated to the benefit of the merit of their parents. But we also learn that the elder brother Mātṛviṣṇu has died in the meantime and that the inscribed image was only installed after his death.<sup>58</sup> The political situation has changed dramatically, for the inscription is no longer dated in the Gupta era but in the first year of the rule of the Alchon king Toramāṇa.<sup>59</sup> Mātṛviṣṇu may have died in the battle that preceded it. His younger brother Dhanyaviṣṇu had to accept the overlordship of the new ruler, but still claims to act on behalf of his elder brother in setting up the image of the Boar. The opening invocation refers to Viṣṇu, who has taken on the form of a Boar, as a column (*stambha*) for the support of the universe.<sup>60</sup> It is not hard to

<sup>57</sup> Like Eran, these were also key sites for the articulation of early politicized Vaiṣṇavism. See Hans Bakker, *The Vākāṭakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 84–87. We intend to explore these parallels further in a more detailed study on Eran.

<sup>58</sup> J. F. Fleet, "Eran Stone Boar Inscription of Toramana," in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 3:158–61, lines 5–8: "mahār[ā\*]jamātṛviṣṇoḥ svarggatasya bhrātṛānujēna | tadanuvīdhāyīnā tatprasādaparīghṛītena dhanyaviṣṇunā tenaiva [sa]hāvibhaktapuṇyakkriyeṇa mātāpitrōḥ puṇyāpyāyanārtham eṣa bhagavato varāhamūrtter jagatparāyaṇasya nārāyaṇasya śilāpras[ādaḥ] sva-viṣay[e] sminn airikiṇe kārītaḥ |" (by Dhanyaviṣṇu, the younger brother of the *mahārāja* Mātṛviṣṇu who has gone to heaven, who is obedient to him (and) accepted with favour by him, accomplishing together with him this shared act of piety, this stone temple of the blessed Nārāyaṇa, who has the form of a Boar, who is entirely devoted to (the welfare) of the universe, has been commissioned here in Airikiṇe, his own territory, for the purpose of increasing the religious merit of (their) parents). Translation: Fleet, "Eran Stone Boar Inscription," 160, adapted.

<sup>59</sup> Lines 1–2: "varṣe prathame pṛthivīm pṛthukīrttau pṛthudyutau mahārājādhirājaśrītoramāṇe praśāsati" (In the first year; while the Mahārājādhirāja, the glorious Toramāṇa, of great fame (and) of great lustre, is governing the earth). Translation: Fleet, "Eran Stone Boar Inscription," 160. For an account of the Hunnic wars in North India, see Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*.

<sup>60</sup> Line 1: "jayati dharanyuddharaṇe ghanaghonāghātāghūṇṇitamahāddhrah devo varāhamūrttis trailokyamahāgrhastambhaḥ" (Victorious is the god (Viṣṇu), who has the form of a Boar, who, in the act of lifting up the earth (out of the waters), caused the mountains to tremble with the



FIG. 12.—Monumental sculpture of Viṣṇu's Boar manifestation at Eran. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

miss the allusion to the Garuḍa-topped column installed by the two brothers earlier at the same site. The use of “*stambha*” in reference to the deity adds a further layer of interpretation to the column as well—it is a material instantiation of the support that Viṣṇu provides his devotees.

Finally, it is important to note that although the brothers' inscription on the west face of the column has received much attention, it is but one of many epigraphs that adorn the column. These smaller inscriptions have not yet been studied. Recalling the image of swarms of bees encircling the trunk of Gaṇeśa in the passage from the *Raghuvamśa* cited above, the Eran column is liberally adorned with what are called shell inscriptions,<sup>61</sup> gently swirling calligraphic

blows of (his) hard snout, who is the column [for the support] of the great house which is the three worlds!). Translation Fleet, “Eran Stone Boar Inscription,” 160, adapted. The expression finds a parallel in the opening verse addressed to Śiva in the *Harṣacarita*, where he is invoked as “the foundation pillar in the undertaking of [the construction of] the city that is the three worlds” (*trailokyānagarārambhamūlastambhāya*). The *Harṣacarita* verse has been quoted in many inscriptions; see Arlo Griffiths and William A. Southworth, “La stèle d'installation de Śrī Satya-devaśvara: Une nouvelle inscription sanskrite de Campā trouvée à Phu'óc Thiệne,” *Journal Asiatique* 295, no. 2 (2007): 349–81, esp. 371–72.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Salomon has identified more than six hundred examples of shell script (*śaṅkhalipi*) inscriptions from across the Indian subcontinent, with the exception of the deep south, dated between the fourth and eighth centuries CE. For a survey of his publications on the subject, see Richard Salomon, “A Recent Claim to Decipherment of the ‘Shell Script,’” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 2 (1987): 313 n. 1. Many of the Aśokan pillars have

engravings that adorned many columns and monuments from the fourth century, as well as several other small inscriptions. These inscriptions are all to be found at the lower square part of the column and on all four sides of the column.<sup>62</sup> We interpret the addition of these extratextual elements as indicative of the life of the column as a ritual object subject to continued embellishment. Attention to these records may also help us to better understand how people engaged and interacted with these monuments.

#### AN ARM (OR TWO) OF THE EARTH: SONDHNI

In 1886 J. F. Fleet discovered remains of two monumental inscribed columns lying scattered in pieces and half buried in the fields around Sondhni, a small hamlet four kilometers southeast of Mandasor in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>63</sup> Known in ancient times as Daśapura, Mandasor was the capital of a ruling family called the Aulikaras in the sixth century. Like so many early dynasties, the Aulikaras might have fallen into obscurity were it not for the flamboyance of a king named Yaśodharman, who commissioned a pair of massive stone columns adorned with elaborate eulogies in honor of himself. To be fair, Yaśodharman had reason to be proud. The columns celebrate his defeat around 532 CE of the Hūṇa Mihirakula, whose father, Toramāṇa of the Eran Boar Inscription, had defeated the Guptas just a few decades before.<sup>64</sup> Considering the conflicts that linked these ruling families and defined the region's political geography, we should read Yaśodharman's monuments at Sondhni in light of the Vaiṣṇava memorial landscape of Eran, a monumental dialogue amongst contemporaries and competitors. While inspired by their predecessors' pious works, Sondhni was also an innovative site that departed from the traditional geographies of sanctified spaces as *tīrthas*—that is, oriented along rivers and other remarkable features of the natural landscape.<sup>65</sup> Yaśodharman's columns demarcated a new civic religious space dedicated to Śiva, the chosen deity of the new guard (fig. 13).

been decorated with shell inscriptions as well: Falk, *Aśokan Sites and Artefacts*, 163 (fig. 3), 175 (fig. 2), 203 (fig. 2), and—for an example of a non-Aśokan pillar—237 (fig. 4).

<sup>62</sup> We will deal with these additional inscriptions in a forthcoming study on Eran.

<sup>63</sup> Remains of a third column were reported from about fifty meters away. But because of the decorative pattern on the third column, Fleet thinks they did not belong together. Reported in J. F. Fleet, "Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yaśodharman," in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 3:142–50.

<sup>64</sup> For the chronology of the second Hunnic war, we rely on Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*.

<sup>65</sup> *Tīrthas* ("fords" or "crossings") are the earliest examples of Indian pilgrimage sites and are held sacred because they permit pilgrims to "bridge the gap" by serving as a point of contact between the mundane world and the celestial world of the gods. These locales were traditionally located at river crossings (fords in a literal sense) or other notable features of the physical terrain, such as mountains. Diana L. Eck, "India's *Tīrthas*: 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 323–44.





FIG. 13.—Site of Yaśodharman's columns at Sondhni. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

The distinctiveness of Sondhni as a monumental religious site is evident by its siting in the physical landscape. Daśapura was strategically located along the ancient highway that connected the political center to other major economic and political centers in the region, such as Ujjain, 150 kilometers to the southeast. For the visitor approaching Daśapura from the south, the Sondhni columns would have provided a striking welcome to the capital. The columns are located approximately three kilometers south of the old fortified settlement, located on the north side of the Shivna River. Since it was located at a distance from the settlement center, Sondhni was also removed from the ritual and cult center of the polity, the Paśupatināth Temple positioned on the southern bank of the Shivna River, across from the fortified center.<sup>66</sup> Paśupatināth's riverside location is fitting for a sacred center in South Asia. Sondhni's columns, by contrast, stand in a flat landscape without any natural features to

<sup>66</sup> The fifth- or sixth-century remains at the Paśupatināth include an eight-faced (recarved) *liṅga* currently under active worship. On this *liṅga* and related material evidence, see Joanna Williams, "On the Edge of What? Reconsidering the Place of Mandasor in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," in *The Vākāṭaka Heritage: Indian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. Hans T. Bakker (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2004), 133–41.

distract the viewer from the monuments. Erecting a twelve-meter-high column of stone is not an act of subtlety. It is a highly visible material instantiation of power, defiance, and might, a monumental middle finger to one's enemies and a symbol of stability for one's supporters. Considering the function and placement of the monuments, Sondhni reflects an effort to map a new type of memorial landscape, a space in which the dynamic between religious and political geography found unique expression.

In addition to their function as monuments to Yaśodharman's greatness, the columns and the site in which they are located served the higher aim of proclaiming the greatness of Śiva, the source of the ruler's power. In much the same way as the Gupta rulers sought to homologize themselves with Viṣṇu, and particularly the savior *avatāras* like Varāha and Narasiṃha, Yaśodharman similarly employed religious rhetoric in expressing his political identity, but rather than the god of the Guptas, he venerated Śiva. "May that flying banner (*ketu*) of Śūlapāṇi (i.e. Śiva) destroy the forces of your enemy, the banner that bears the Bull marked by the prints of the five fingers of the daughter of the mountain (i.e. Pārvatī), that (bull) whose terrific bellowing makes the quarters vibrate, bewildering the demons with fear, and whose pounding horns make the rocks in the valleys of Mount Sumeru crack."<sup>67</sup> Although the inscription does not directly homologize the column to a *dhvaja*, the reference to Śiva's banner as bearing the Bull insignia certainly encourages such an interpretation. Such an association would also participate in the wider deployment of the *dhvaja* symbolism observed at contemporaneous sites. The crowning elements of both of Yaśodharman's columns are now missing, but it is plausible that each would have been topped with the image of the bull.<sup>68</sup>

Like Eran, the columns would have been oriented in direct line with a temple. Structural remains have not survived, but a partial reconstruction is possible from early reports and sculptural remains. In 1908, C. E. Luard surveyed and photographed the area immediately surrounding the two columns.<sup>69</sup> Drawing upon local memory of the place, he identified the remains of two additional pillars, which were set up on a terraced area approximately four feet above the surrounding land. Atop this raised area, a massive *sahasraliṅga*—

<sup>67</sup> Fleet, "Mandasor Stone Pillar Inscription of Yaśodharman," 142–50, verse 1: "vepante yasya bhīmaṣṭanītabhayaśamudbhṛāntadaityā dīgāntāḥ, śṛṅgāghātaiḥ sumeror vvighaṭitadr̥śadaḥ kandarā yaḥ karoti | ukṣāṇaṃ taṃ dadhānaḥ kṣitidharatanayādatta (pañcāṅgulā)ṅkaṃ, drāghīṣṭhaḥ śūlapaṇeḥ kṣapayatu bhavatāṃ śatruṭejāṃsi ketuḥ ||." Translation: Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Since the crowing elements of one of the columns are displayed at ground level at the site, it is possible to see the circular pattern of carved joins set around a central socket on top of the lion-carved abacus. This is a clear indication that there was a final crowning element, which has been lost.

<sup>69</sup> C. E. Luard, "Gazetteer Gleanings in Central India," *Indian Antiquary* 37 (1908): 107–10.

a phallic emblem of Śiva covered with innumerable smaller *līṅgas*—stands beneath a pipal tree (fig. 14).<sup>70</sup>

Considered in light of other remarkable material remains and architectural fragments found scattered around the fields—including massive *dvārapālas*, whose adornments and accoutrement clearly evince a Śaiva affiliation, decorative fragments, and perhaps pieces of a gateway—it is plausible that this terraced area was the site of a structural temple. In contrast to Eran’s univocal Vaiṣṇavism, the temple at Sondhni would have been dedicated to Śiva, and the *sahasralīṅga* mentioned above may well have been the cult icon under worship. As a further interpretation, we might consider Sondhni’s *sahasralīṅga* as inspired by the Eran Boar. Albeit manifestations of distinct theologies, these icons display a striking intervisibility in their representation of the multiplicity and creative potential encompassed within a single form.<sup>71</sup>

In composing the verses that would be engraved upon the column(s), the poet clearly had the object in mind. The text was deliberately designed to complement the object upon which it was carved, and one could even imagine that the sight of the column inspired the poet’s verse. The language of the inscription highlights and adds to this visual language by repeatedly and poetically evoking the physicality of the object. The column is likened to the arm of the king: the strong arm of the warrior, calloused by the rub of the bowstring; the arm that supports the earth when she is weary from the oppressive energies of unrighteous rulers. The metaphor is driven home in the final verses, which liken Yaśodharman’s arm to the column, and to the particular column he erects as an arm of the earth, raised up in testament to his greatness: “By that illustrious Yaśodharman, who reigns the earth with a steady, clublike arm as beautiful as a column, this column (*stambha*) that will last till the end of the Age, has been erected here, as if to measure the earth from above, to count the multitude of stars, and to point out to the highest skies, as it were, the path of his glory achieved by his heroic deeds. (A column) that is, as it were, a raised arm of the earth.”<sup>72</sup> But this is not an unprecedented poetic metaphor. The in-

<sup>70</sup> This *līṅga* was not reported by Fleet or Luard and the circumstances of its discovery remain unknown to us. Given its current location, under the pipal behind the terraced area, and given its massive proportions, it is likely not far from its original location. According to von Mitterwallner, the *līṅga* is likely contemporaneous with the other early sixth-century remains. It may well be one of the oldest manifestations of its form. See Gritli von Mitterwallner, “Evolution of the *Līṅga*,” in *Discourses on Śiva Proceedings of a Symposium on the Nature of Religious Imagery*, ed. Michael Meister (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 12–31, esp. 22.

<sup>71</sup> In the case of the Eran Varāha the icon illustrates a narrative episode in which the *ṛṣis* are clinging to Viṣṇu as the savior deity, whereas the *sahasralīṅga* is rather a conceptual icon in which many particular manifestations of *līṅgas* participate in the underlying reality of a single all-encompassing divinity.

<sup>72</sup> Verse 7: “[gā]m evonmāṭum ūrdhvaṃ viṅaṇayitum iva jyotiṣāṃ cakkravālaṃ, nirddeṣṭum mārggam uccair diva iva sukr̥topārjjitāyāḥ svakīrtteḥ | tenākālpāntakālādvadhir avanibhujā śrīyaśodharmanāyāṃ, stambhaḥ stambhābhirāmasthirabhujaparigheṇocchritiṃ nāyito ttra ||.” Translation: Bakker, *Monuments of Hope, Gloom, and Glory*, 30.



FIG. 14.—*Sahasralinga* at Sondhni. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

scribed column of Samudragupta at Allahabad evokes the same image.<sup>73</sup> This parallel could serve as further evidence of the Aulikaras in dialogue with their contemporaries. At the same time, the power of the image rests also in its evo-

<sup>73</sup> “mahārājādhirājaśrīsamudraguptasya sarvvapṛthivīvijayajanitodayavyāpta nikhilāvanitalāṃ kīrtim itas tridaśapati bhavanagamanāvāptalaḷitasukha vicaraṇām ācakṣāṇa iva bhuvo bāhur

cation of a widely intelligible human gesture, a bearing witness through the acknowledgment of presence.

The most unique feature of Sondhni has yet to be addressed: namely, why are there two seemingly identical columns with the same inscription at the same site? The repetition of the same epigraphic text on identical objects has few precedents or comparanda.<sup>74</sup> This doubling could represent a desire for visual symmetry within the site, it might also speak to a political alliance or partnership. It might also be that the columns materialize the poetic metaphor—they are the two arms of the earth raised up in testament to Yaśodharman's greatness. This question will be addressed in a subsequent study.

#### SPEAR AND FLOWER IN THE SOUTH: MAHAKUTA

With this fourth case study, on the Mahakuta column, we depart the plains of central India and head south to the Deccan region ruled by the Western Cālukyas from the sixth to eighth century CE. Slightly later than the previous examples, the Mahakuta column displays rich symbolism and density of meaning not observed in the previous cases. Unfortunately, this column is the only one under study here that is no longer in its original location, being currently housed in the Archaeological Museum of the Archaeological Survey of India located in the Gol Gumbaz complex at Bijapur, Karnataka (fig. 15). However, early survey reports record the monument's original position in front of the temple complex at Mahakuta, a Cālukya period group of temples at a four-kilometer distance east of Badami, the Cālukya capital. In this section we argue that the Mahakuta column may be seen as the primary agent that determined the contours of the sacred landscape of Mahakuta as it is encountered today. The following paragraphs work to show how the column functioned to memorialize ideals of piety, sovereignty, and kinship.

One of the main challenges in excavating the layers of meaning that inhere in the Mahakuta column is determining where it was first installed. Varying views have been put forward on the basis of the column's inscription, which is rich in content and equally challenging to interpret. We begin with the description of J. F. Fleet, who was the first to report on the column and who also edited the inscription.<sup>75</sup> At the time of his visit in 1881, the column lay about nine

ayam ucchritaḥ stambhaḥ." Dines Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 1: *From the Sixth Century B.C. to the Sixth Century A.D.*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1956), 262–68, lines 29–30.

<sup>74</sup> The Bhilsad temple may provide a comparable case, but it is unclear if the inscribed objects there are monolithic columns or structural supports.

<sup>75</sup> Fleet mentions the column for the first time in his "Sanskrit and Old Canarese Inscriptions. No. CXI," *Indian Antiquary* 10 (1881): 102. For the inscription we refer to J. F. Fleet, "Mahakuta Pillar Inscription of Mangalesa," *Indian Antiquary* 19 (1890): 7–20, and the recent edition of Shrinivas V. Padigar, "Mahākūṭa Pillar Inscription of Maṅgalēśa," in *Inscriptions of the Calukyas of Bādāmi: c. 543–757 A.D.* (Bādāmi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2010), 12–15.





FIG. 15.—Mahakuta column at Gol Gumbaz. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

meters to the east of the central gateway to the site, which is at the northeast corner of the courtyard of the temple complex. The column, about 4.3 meters high, was found separate from the capital.<sup>76</sup> The crowning element is missing.<sup>77</sup>

The lengthy inscription is written in Sanskrit in Kannada characters in sixteen lines read from bottom to top. It starts with a genealogy of the Cālukyas, culminating in the reigning king Maṅgaleśa, who is praised in full-blown poetic *praśasti* style. The primary object of the inscription is to record the increase of a previous endowment to Makuṭeśvaranātha, a local form of Śiva. The part leading up to the actual endowment is dense with literary symbolism in relation to the column's identity:

And he (Maṅgaleśa), his mind set on the conquest of the northern region, after conquering king Buddha and having seized all his wealth, with a mind eager to set up a *column of victory of might* on the bank of the Bhāgīrathī River, having considered that first of all a *spear that is the column of victory of dharma* must be set up, after summoning the queen named Durlabhadevī, his own father's wife, being capable of executing the task, most faithful to her husband like Damayantī, being the ornament of the Batpura family, her body purified by her share in the fruits of manifold religious activity—grants her this assignment: “The riches of the Kalacuris have been spent on the deity wealth (*devadronī*)<sup>78</sup> of our own temple and this property here was granted by our father and elder brother as his own deity wealth to Makuṭeśvaranātha. You should supplement it with the income of the ten villages headed by Śrīyambāṭaka, the two Timmaris, the two Nasaves, the village Vṛhimukha, Kesuvoḷa, Kendora, Mānya, and Nandigraṃa.” Accordingly, in the fifth glorious year of his reign that is continuing to grow, in the current Siddhārtha [*saṃvatsara*], on the full moon day of Vaiśākha, he set up this [spear].<sup>79</sup>

The inscription distinguishes between two types of columns through a poetic technique of inversion. By playing with the order of the words in the compound, the eulogist expands the semantic range of the words used. First of all,

<sup>76</sup> Fleet, “Mahakuta Pillar Inscription of Mangaleśa,” 80.

<sup>77</sup> In form and appearance, the column is strikingly similar to an uninscribed column standing in front of the Rāvaṇa Phaḍi cave temple at Aihole. This is likewise a site associated with the Western Cālukyas, indicating a common workmanship.

<sup>78</sup> For *devadronī*, see D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphical Glossary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966), 88.

<sup>79</sup> Lines 11–14: “saguttarā(sa uttara)digvijayakṛ(kṛ)tabuddhir buddhanṛpam avajitya tasya vasum aśeṣam upagrhya bhāgīrathīkule śaktijayastambhaniropaṇautsukyena manasā dhammajayastambhaśaktiḥ prathamataram eva niropayitavyety avadhṛtya tadanukaraṇayogyabhūtāṃ madayantīm(damayantīm) iva mahāpativratāṃ batpurakulalālāmbhūtāṃ naikavidhadharmmaphalabhāgyapavitrīkṛtāśarīrāṃ svagurupatnīm durl[abhanāmadheyī(yā)n devīm āhūya idam adhikāraṃ saṃbodhayati [\*] kalatsūrigana(kalatsūridhanaṃ) saṃ(sva)devagrhaddevadronyāṃ gatam idaṃ ca dravyaṃ svadevadronyāṃ makuṭeśvaranāthasyāsmākaṃ pitrā jyeṣṭhenopadattāṃ śrīyambāṭakatimmanādivenasavedevvṛhimukhagrāmakesuvoḷalakendoramānyānandigrāmaprabhṛtīdaśagrāmaparibhogena samarpayadhvam iti [\*] tad uttarottarapravardhamānārājyapañcamasā śrīvarṣe pravarttamāne siddhārthe vaiśākhaṇmāsyāṃ imaṃ pratiṣṭhāpitavān [\*].” Italics added to English translation.

he refers to the intention of Maṅgaleśa to set up a column of victory of might (*śaktijayastambha*) on the bank of the Bhāgīrathī (viz. the Ganges). It speaks of Maṅgaleśa's high ambitions as a ruler of a kingdom in the Deccan far removed from the heartland of North India, but it also critically involves the adoption of a powerful cultural metaphor from one of classical India's defining poems. For the image of setting up a column of victory on the bank of the Ganges comes straight from Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*.<sup>80</sup> That the composer of the inscription was inspired by Kālidāsa is evident from the opening lines of the inscription in which he praises the line of the Cālukyas in the very same words used by Kālidāsa to describe the line of the Raghus.<sup>81</sup> The Mahakuta column itself, on the other hand, is pregnantly called a spear that is a column of victory of piety (*dharmajayastambhaśakti*). By inverting the word order the poet has created a compound that merges literary and religious symbolism with the visual form of the object.<sup>82</sup> While the top part of the column is lost, art historian Carol Bolon has argued that the crowning element may have been a sculpted stone piece found lying loose in the Mahakuta compound. Bolon describes this triangular object, adorned with floriated embellishments on each side, as an "abstract relief lotus, symbolic of Śrī, Fortune."<sup>83</sup> When placed atop the long slim column shaft, this pointed crowing element would have lent the object a distinctly spear-like appearance, a visual play on "a spear of piety" that the inscription imagined. The homology of column to spear may have been an idiomatic one in the Cālukya polity. The following figure shows an elephant-topped column found in the courtyard of the temple complex at Alampur displaying a carved spear on the shaft, which provides a more literal visual representation of the same homology (fig. 16).

The precise circumstances of the endowment to Maṅgaleśvaranātha are not entirely clear and have led to several different interpretations, all bearing on the question of the original identity of Maṅgaleśvaranātha. While some scholars have taken it to be the present Maṅgaleśvara Temple, or otherwise an earlier temple standing at the same spot, we follow Bolon's suggestion that the Maṅgaleśvaranātha to which Maṅgaleśa's father and elder brother had granted property refers to an older and smaller temple shrine located at a distance of about four hundred meters up the hill from the Mahakuta compound. The

<sup>80</sup> See above, section "Language of Sovereignty."

<sup>81</sup> The words "yathāvidhihutaṅnāṁ yathākāmārcitārthināṁ" (lines 1–2) (who offer oblations into the fire according to rule, who satisfy supplicants according to their desire) have been copied straight from *Raghuvamśa* 1.6ab (Vallabhadeva).

<sup>82</sup> Fleet ("Mahakuta Pillar Inscription of Mangaleśa," 19 n. 46) had difficulties understanding the compound, taking it as a *tatpuruṣa* ("the prowess of a pillar of victory of religion"): "Unless some other meaning can be found for it, the use of the word *śakti* here does not seem very appropriate." We rather take it as a *karmadhāraya* compound.

<sup>83</sup> Carol Radcliffe Bolon, "The Mahākūṭa Pillar and its Temples," *Artibus Asiae* 41, nos. 2–3 (1979): 253–68, fig. 4. We were not able to locate this object during our visit to Mahakuta in January 2017.



FIG. 16.—Spear column at Alampur. Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

name “Lord of the mountain crest” is fitting with the location of this shrine built under a cliff that faces over Mahakuta’s valley. The endowment of the revenue of ten villages to this temple would have led to the accumulation of much wealth and the consequent development of the present Mahakuta compound. It is here that the column was found, standing at some distance away from the old Makuṭeśvaranātha temple but within a direct line of sight. The column has thus played a primary role as an agent in the historical development and geographical spread of the sacred site of Mahakuta, functioning as a founding column for the new complex. Today, the main temple of the compound is known as Hosa (“new”) Makuṭeśvaranātha.

Two additional lines written at the bottom of the column below the main inscription introduce us to two more persons involved in the setting up of the column: “the two sons of Pubesa, residents of Āryapura (Aihole).” Their role in the event is described in remarkable terms; they are called “dealers in pillars of victory of religion.”<sup>84</sup> Written at the bottom part of the column and within clear view for all to see, it serves as an advertisement for their business. The second line gives their names as Dāṭa and Āna. Furthermore it calls the object a flower column.<sup>85</sup> This additional denomination adds one more layer of meaning to the column, referring to yet another aspect of the shape of the object. The fluted pillar evokes the form of a flower, and thus conveys notions of fertility that have long been associated with columns. Significantly this last line is the only one written in the Kannada language, addressed at a local audience. The importance of language comes into full view in the final case study.

#### MEETING OF NORTH AND SOUTH: PATTADAKAL

The inscribed column realized its full potential at Pattadakal.<sup>86</sup> For several centuries Pattadakal functioned as the royal commemorative site of the Cālukya rulers. The Pattadakal column, belonging to the reign of the eighth-century king Kīrtivarman II, is positioned in between three temples, all of which are referred to by name in the lengthy Sanskrit inscription engraved on it. The temple Vijayeśvara was established by Kīrtivarman’s grandfather Vijayāditya, the temple Lokeśvara by his son Vikramāditya II’s queen-consort Lokamahādevī, and the temple Trailokeśvara by the latter’s son Kīrtivarman II’s queen-consort Trailokyamahādevī. All three temples were Śaiva temples and, as can be ob-

<sup>84</sup> “āryapuravāsakaḥ pubesasya sutau sthāpitā(tam) idaṃ, dharmmajayastambhavyāpārakāś ca tau.” We follow the alternative suggestion of Fleet (in “Mahakuta Pillar Inscription of Mangalesa,” 8 n. 2) to read a stop after *idaṃ* and read *dharmajayastambhavyāpārakāś* as a compound.

<sup>85</sup> “dāṭa āna kuṭṭida pu(pū)-kambha.” For the interpretation of *pū-kambha* we rely on Padigar, *Inscriptions of the Cālukyas*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> J. F. Fleet, “Pattadakal Pillar Inscription of the Time of Kīrtivarman II,” in *Epigraphia Indica* 3:1–7. See also Shrinivas V. Padigar, “Pattadakal Pillar Inscription of Kīrtivarman II,” in *Inscriptions of the Cālukyas of Bādāmi*, 234–36.



served from their names, each of them was named after the person who realized its construction. In addition to providing us with the names of the temples and their donees, the inscription also celebrates the successful reigns of each king through an account of their deeds in glorifying terms. The inscription thus commemorates the rules of three generations of Cālukya kings and, through its strategic position, connects the three temples built during their subsequent reigns.

The most outstanding feature of the inscription, engraved on the octagonal upper part of the column, is that it contains two versions of the same text written in two different scripts (fig. 17*a* and *b*). One version is written in the northern Nāgarī script, covering twenty-eight lines on three sides of the column (east, northeast, north).<sup>87</sup> The other is in the local southern script, covering twenty-five lines on four sides (northwest, west, southwest, south). Standing at the interface of north and south, the Pattadakal column in many ways engages with questions of directionality, regional identity, and authority.<sup>88</sup> The self-conscious presentation of north and south expressed in the use of the two scripts can be directly linked to the biography of the person who established the column. His name is given as Jñānaśiva, and he is introduced as a Śaiva preceptor (*ācārya*) who had come to Pattadakal from North India, from a place located on the northern bank of the Ganges.<sup>89</sup> The pedigree of his family as well as his teacher's lineage is given, going back to three generations.<sup>90</sup> The theme of coming together is signaled already in the opening verse of the inscription, which celebrates, suggestively, the union of Śiva and Pārvaṭī (*hari-gaurīsaṃgamo*). Finally, the meeting of north and south is also an intrinsic

<sup>87</sup> Fleet observes that "the south-east face is blank, except where it was utilised, near the bottom, to insert a passage that had been carelessly omitted in the Nāgarī script" ("Pattadakal Pillar Inscription," 1 n. 1).

<sup>88</sup> See also Whitney Cox, "Scribe and Script in the Calukya West Deccan," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 1 (2010): 1–28, here 20: "This was the period of Rāṣṭrakūṭa ascendancy in the western Deccan, and it appears that the use of Nāgarī came to be recognized as a visible sign of royal ambition, in the process domesticating the script into its recognizable variety."

<sup>89</sup> Line 17: "jñānaśivācāryyēṇa gaṃgāyā uttaraku(ū)le mṛgathanikāhāraviṣayād ihāgatena śrīvijayeśvarabhaṭṭārakasyāśrayāvasthiteṇa sthāpito 'yam trisūlamudrāṃko svakīyāitanadv[āre] mahāśailastambhaḥ" (this great stone column, marked with the seal of [Śiva's] trident, has been established at the gateway to his own shrine by the officiant Jñānaśiva who has come here (i.e., Paṭṭadakal) from Mrgathanikāhāra-ṣaya on the northern bank of the Gaṅgā, [and] who is residing in the dwelling of lord *śrī-Vijayeśvara*).

<sup>90</sup> This is the interpretation of Padigar, "Paṭṭadakal Pillar Inscription," 236. It requires taking Jñānaśiva as the name given to him at his Śaiva Siddhānta initiation and Śubhadevarūpa as the name given to him at birth. Śubhadevarūpa is introduced as the son of Śivarūpa and grandson of Śivavardhamānarūpa (lines 15–16: "śāṇḍilyasagotreṇa śivavarddhamānarūpapautreṇa śivarūpaputtreṇa śubhadevarūpena"). Jñānaśivācārya is said to be "the disciple of the disciple's disciple at the feet of the blessed and worshipful Payobhakṣin ("living on milk"), who was marked by the Śivaśāna" (lines 16–17: "śivaśāsanāṃka(h)bhagavatpūjyapayobhakṣipādapraśiṣyaśiṣyeṇa"). Fleet instead suggests taking the first pedigree to refer to the family line of a sculptor named Śubhadeva and the second to the lineage of the Śaiva officiant Jñānaśiva. This requires taking the ending *-rūpa* to be short for *-rūpakāra* (sculptor).

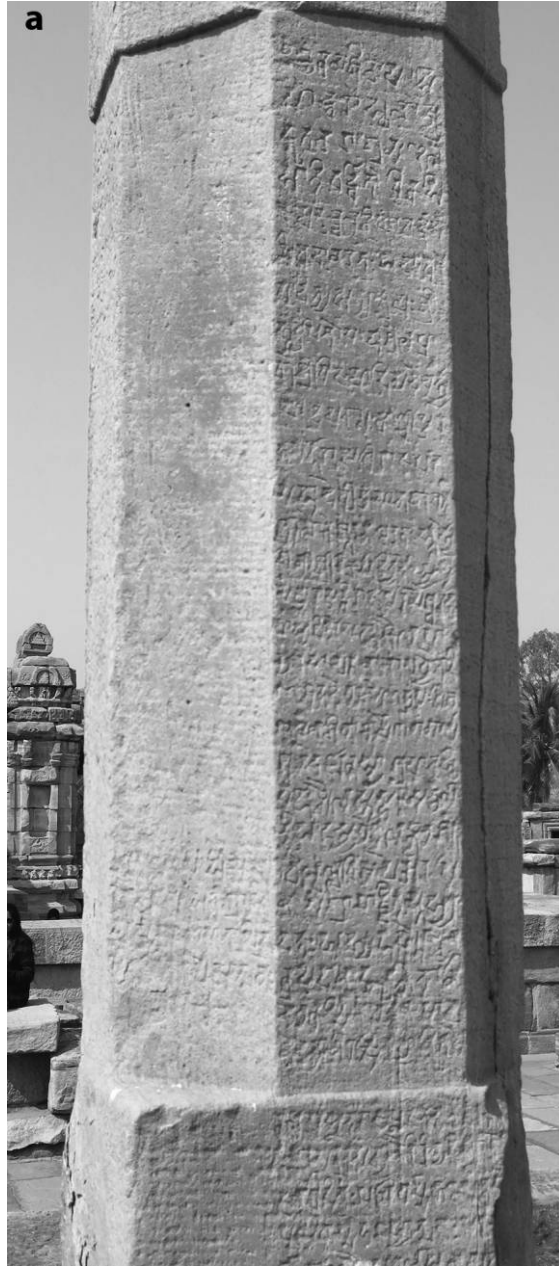


FIG. 17.—Inscribed column at Pattadakal with inscription in northern Nāgarī script (*a*) and local southern script (*b*). Photo by authors. Color version available as an online enhancement.

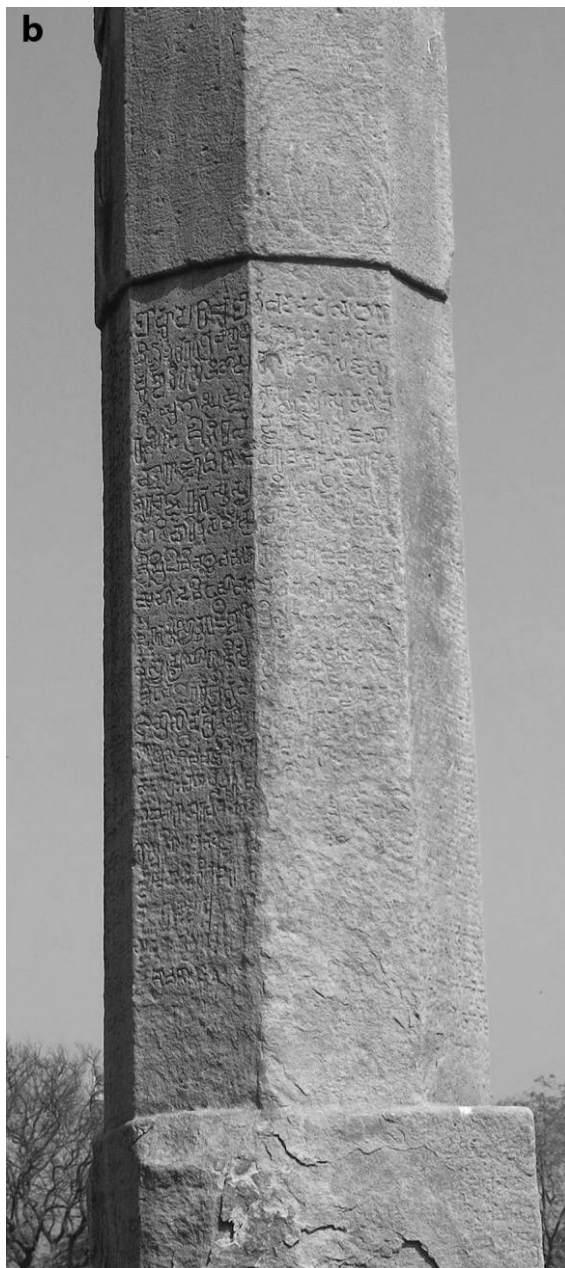


FIG. 17.— (*Continued*)

aspect of the temple landscape of Pattadakal, which, as has been observed by many art historians, is a unique meeting ground for the northern (Nagara) and the southern (Dravida) styles of Indian architecture.

The inscription concludes with several grants that were made “in the month of Śrāvaṇa, on the day of the new moon, at a full eclipse of the sun.” These were given “for increasing the merit of [Jñānaśīva’s] father and mother and for the welfare of himself.”<sup>91</sup> The dating of the event shows how the column as a ritual object participates in the ritual calendar, having been granted at a very powerful moment in time, on the day of the new moon when there was a full eclipse of the sun. A statement like this reminds that columns should not only be viewed in the context of place but also in relation to time, which is pregnant with meaning and intention. Although no year is given, Fleet was able to identify the precise date as June 25, 754 CE, because on that day there was an eclipse that was visible across India and it falls squarely within Kīrti-varman II’s reign.

Although the crowning element of the column is now missing, from the statement that the column bore the mark of the seal of (Śīva’s) trident (*triśūla-mudrāṅko*) we can deduce that it was most probably shaped like a trident.<sup>92</sup> As in the case of several of the other examples discussed in this paper, paying close attention to the words used to refer to the column in the inscription may allow us to hypothesize the original shape of the column. It is noteworthy that many of the columns’ capitals discussed here have not survived the passage of time. While there may be different reasons for this in individual cases, the column would certainly have been a major focus of attack by neighboring enemies, standing present for all to see as a proud symbol of kingship and victory (fig. 18). Toppling its crown would be a sign of ultimate defeat, in particular in the light of the symbolism of the *dhvaja* as a ritual object discussed earlier. It is not unlikely that the Pattadakal column lost its crowning part in times of war. The reign of the Western Cālukyas came to an end after the rule of Kīrti-varman II, who was defeated by the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Dantidurga in 757 CE, only thirteen years after the erection of the column.

The ritual life of the column does not end with its installation and not even with its toppling down. At the time Fleet saw the column for the first time, in 1881, it was under active worship and called *Lakṣmīkambha*, the pillar of the

<sup>91</sup> Lines 22–23: “śrāvaṇamāse amāvāsyāyāṃ sarvvagrāse suryyagrahaṇe mātāpitrō[h] puṇyā-bhivṛddhaye ātmanaḥ śrī(śre)y[ortham ca].” Below the main inscription the column becomes square and contains two more smaller inscriptions, recording land grants, again written in two script varieties (northern script on the east, southern on the south). On the west face there is a further barely legible inscription in the southern script, but this time without a corresponding northern script duplicate on the north face.

<sup>92</sup> An example of a votive pillar shaped like a trident is the famous Mathurā pillar inscription of Candragupta II, dated 380/381 CE (*Epigraphia Indica* 21 [1931]: 1–19).



FIG. 18.—Pattadakal temple site with remains of Jñānaśiva's column in the foreground. Color version available as an online enhancement. Photo by authors.

goddess Lakṣmī. It was smeared with oil because of the worship and he had to have it cleaned in order to read the inscription.<sup>93</sup> The column stood in the house of the local priest, “on the north of the enclosure of the temple that is now known by the name of Virūpākṣa.”<sup>94</sup> This corresponds with its present location, although the house is no longer there. The site of Pattadakal and its temple complex have undergone extensive renovation and conservation by the Archaeological Survey of India in the twentieth century. The column now stands in the open on a pedestal in front of the gate of the Virūpākṣa temple, the name under which the Lokeśvara Temple referred to in the inscription is known nowadays. Today Pattadakal is a recognized UNESCO World Heritage site, and Jñānaśiva's column takes pride of place.

#### COLUMNS IN CONTEXT

The object is not a mere echo of the text, however intimately they are connected. Like words woven together to communicate a complex and multifac-

<sup>93</sup> Fleet, “Sanskrit and Old Canarese Inscriptions,” 168.

<sup>94</sup> Fleet, “Pattadakal Pillar Inscription,” 1.



eted message—the fundamental action implied by the word “text”—material things, too, communicate complex metaphors and layers of associations.<sup>95</sup> Enduring memorials erected in public spaces, inscribed columns were integrated within a dynamic social world and took on lives that were distinct from, yet indelibly tied to, the particular historical moment that inspired their creation. As monuments marking the intersection of ideology and material, politics and place, text and object, columns provide critical access to the lived world of early South Asia.<sup>96</sup> Unlike portable texts, monumental writings were intended for particular material and spatial contexts. To understand what these texts were designed to do we need to understand the monuments they adorn and the place they hold within the larger built landscape and polity. Studying columns in context enriches our interpretation of the epigraphic texts by considering the settings in which they were meant to be encountered. This emphasis on context also contributes to developing perspectives on the experiential dimensions of religion in early India by tracing the ways in which meanings accrue in particular material forms and the values attached to them by individuals and communities over time. Making the column itself the subject of inquiry, this study reengages with key primary sources, both textual and material, to contribute a new perspective on religion as emplaced practice—inseparable from the spatial and material contexts in which it was lived.

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<sup>95</sup> As Christopher Tilley remarks, “material forms complement what can be communicated in language rather than duplicating or reflecting what can be said in words in a material form. If material culture simply reified in a material medium that which could be communicated in words it would be quite redundant.” Christopher Tilley, “Objectification,” in *The Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Keane Tilley et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 62. Tilley here summarizes some of the main points from his earlier book *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>96</sup> This approach marks a significant departure from the few previous studies that have reflected on the columns as objects. Characterized by an archetypalism that framed the column as a universal symbolic form, John Irwin’s work typifies this perspective and he views individual columns as so many instantiations of the axis mundi. John Irwin, “Buddhism and the Cosmic Pillar,” in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, ed. G. Gnoli and L. Lanciotti (Rome: Istituto Italiano per Il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1987), 635–60.